Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter One
4. Chapter Two
5. Chapter Three
6. Chapter Four
7. Chapter Five
8. Chapter Six
9. Chapter Seven
10. Chapter Eight
11. Chapter Nine
12. Chapter Ten
13. Chapter Eleven
14. Chapter Twelve
15. Chapter Thirteen
16. Chapter Fourteen
17. Chapter Fifteen
18. Chapter Sixteen
19. Chapter Seventeen
20. Chapter Eighteen
21. Chapter Nineteen
22. Chapter Twenty
23. Chapter Twenty-One
24. Chapter Twenty-Two
25. Chapter Twenty-Three
26. Chapter Twenty-Four
27. Chapter Twenty-Five
28. Chapter Twenty-Six
29. Chapter Twenty-Seven
30. Chapter Twenty-Eight
31. Epilogue

Allegiances

OakClan

Leader- Froststar: Brown tabby she-cat with frosty blue eyes

Deputy- Goldenfire: Large golden tabby tom with green eyes

Medicine cat- Lilyrose: White and dark gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Senior warriors

Vixenpool: Red and white she-cat with blue eyes

Blueheart: Blue tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Redstripe: Ginger and white tom with green eyes

Owlflight: Brown tabby tom with green eyes

Songscratch: Light brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Swiftsoul: Black and white spotted tom with hazel eyes

Amberheart: Ginger and white she-cat with bright green eyes

Warriors

Graywolf: Gray she-cat with dark patches and orange eyes

Wolfstripe: Dusty brown tabby tom with lighter paws/muzzle and blue eyes

Poolheart: Gray and white tom with yellow eyes

Wildwing: Black tom with spiky fur, brown paws, and green eyes

Sedgepelt: White she-cat with one blue eye and one yellow eye

Rowanflower: Dark ginger she-cat with lighter paws and dark green eyes

Talonclaw: Silver and white tabby tom with bright green eyes

Queens

Dawnflame: Cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes (Mother to Swiftsoul's kits: Hailkit & Meadowkit)

Kits

Hailkit: Dark gray patched she-cat with light green eyes and lighter patches

Meadowkit: Cream pointed tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Elders

Iceleaf: White she-cat with dark green eyes

GlacierClan

Leader- Sparrowstar: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy- Darkeyes: White she-cat with black ears, paws, muzzle, and tail with indigo eyes

Medicine cat- Poppypool: Bright red-orange tabby she-cat with bright green eyes

Senior warriors

Otterfire: Brown tom with orange eyes

Stormfern: Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Daisystep: Cream she-cat with blue eyes

Perchwhisker: Blue tabby she-cat with green eyes

Warriors

Birdfoot: Gray and white she-cat with light blue eyes

Spiritsight: Black she-cat with indigo eyes

Cedarpelt: Dark gray tom with amber eyes

Nutfur: Chestnut tom with amber eyes

Ashspots: Gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes

Hickorytree: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Foxpelt: Dark calico she-cat with orange eyes

Rosefur: Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Fawnstripe: Dark gray and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Pikedive: Gray tabby tom with green eyes

Sorrelfur: 3 gray-toned she-cat with amber eyes

Flamefrost: Yellow tabby tom with blue eyes

Petalfire: Calico she-cat with amber eyes

Sandyfrost: Pale ginger tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Duckfern: Brown tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes

Frogstep: Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes

Tawnyheart: Calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Hawkflight: Dark gray tabby tom with lighter paws, belly, muzzle, tail tip and yellow eyes

DawnClan

Leader- Lichenstar: Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Deputy- Pebblewhisker: Yellow tabby tom with blue eyes

Medicine cat- Shellfur: Spotted gray tom with green eyes

Senior warriors

Fennelfur: Sandy colored she-cat with blue eyes

Leaffire: Brown and white tabby she-cat with light blue eyes

Warriors

Rosefern: Cherry-red tabby she-cat with a bright ginger tail and pale blue eyes

Petaltail: Red, brown, and white calico tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Dustskip: Dusty brown tabby tom with bright yellow eyes and a white chest, muzzle, paws, and tail tip

Mistlesky: Dark blue-gray tabby she-cat with lighter paws and blue eyes

Stoneblaze: Blue-gray tom with pale blue eyes and dark ears, tail, and paws

Hollyfire: Tortoiseshell she-cat with red patches and holly-colored eyes

Emberburn: Tortoiseshell tom with dark red/ginger patches and bright purple eyes

Mosspelt: Gray and white splotched she-cat with bright orange eyes

Gingerheart: Bright ginger tabby tom with piercing blue eyes and dark stripes

Firestep: Flame-colored mackerel tabby tom with dark green eyes

Adderseed: Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes and white paws

Goosewing: Gray speckled tom with bright yellow eyes

Streampool: Dark blue-tabby tom with dark green eyes

Snowshine: Snow-white she-cat with one blue eye and one yellow eye

Branchstripe: Dark honey-brown tabby tom with dark blue eyes

Patchsnow: Dark brown she-cat with white patches and yellow eyes

Lizardberry: Cream-pointed tom with dark blue eyes

Fallingash: Cream tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes

Queens

Coppersight: Rustic ginger tabby she-cat with orange eyes (Mother to Streampool's kits: Bumblekit, Berrykit, and Splashkit)

Elders

Echospeck: White and gray spotted she-cat with blue eyes

Halfsnow: Golden brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Poppybee: Pale tabby she-cat with light blue eyes

Whiteblaze: White she-cat with amber eyes

Kits

Bumblekit: Rusty ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Berrykit: Blue tabby tom with orange eyes

Splashkit: Dark blue swirled tabby she-cat with amber eyes

NightClan

Leader- Squirrelstar: Ginger tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Deputy- Sneezesong: Light yellow tabby tom with green eyes

Senior warriors

Shredsplash: Blue tabby she-cat with shredded ears and amber eyes

Maplewhisker: Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Heronstripe: White she-cat with a green left eye and blue right eye

Firestripe: Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Snowmask: Black she-cat with a white face and blue eyes

Warriors
Shelltail: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Brokenflower: Black she-cat with blue eyes

Cloverheart: Calico she-cat with blue eyes

Fawnpelt: Light calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Otterflower: Brown she-cat with green eyes

Jaggedsong: Light brown she-cat with light green eyes and lighter paws

Moonwish: Fluffy golden tabby she-cat with bright yellow eyes

Shadowstream: Small dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Prologue

Fog swirled around Rowantail's paws as he stalked through the murky, muddy forest. The dead trees loomed over him like mountains, their branches were leafless and lifeless. He leaped over a fallen log, clearing it in one graceful bound before trudging on. The bitterness of his demise still filled him from ears to claws as he remembered the image of Thorntail and Nightshrike glaring at him before she pinned him down and slashed open his throat.

Self-consciously, he put a paw to the life-ending wound that stained his fur with blood and dripped the red liquid beneath him. He didn't feel the pain from his wound like he did when he first arrived in the Dark Forest, but the sting was still there. Shaking out his pelt, Rowantail padded into a clearing and sat down, waiting impatiently.

"About time you came," came a slick mew from his right. Rowantail didn't look at the cat. He knew exactly who it was; the same cat who claimed his life. Nightstar looked worse than Rowantail, and that was saying something. Instead of one fatal wound to her neck or underbelly, the former DawnClan leader was covered in bloody wounds, that didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. "I thought you wouldn't."

Rowantail eyed her like a cornered fox in a fit. "I didn't want to," he responded in a growl. "But there's nothing else to do in this pit." He kicked a pebble at his right front paw, sending it skidding away into the dark grass.

There was the sound of rustling and Rowantail looked over his shoulder to see a gray tom with a horribly scarred neck. Rowantail narrowed his eyes and heard Nightstar meow a greeting to the tom.

"Halfthroat," Nightstar's voice was pleased, as though she was glad her former mentor showed up for the ceremony. "Are we ready to choose a cat?"

Halfthroat nodded, the green slime that bubbled at his lips trickled down his chin and dripped onto the ground. Rowantail held back a gag as he recalled the tom dying from greencough of all things. *A real warrior dies in battle.* He thought with scorn. "I believe we are, Nightstar."

"Good," Nightstar swished her tail across the ground and turned to face the dead trees, that morphed into a clearing with bracken structures circling the three cats.

Rowantail recognized it as the DawnClan camp. Even with the night sky and the blanket of snow on the ground, the twinkle of moonlight made everything crystal clear. He turned his head as Nightstar and Halfthroat headed for a rather large den, protected from the elements of the wind and rain but not the snow. Reluctantly, he followed.

Nightstar's tail was level with her body, her tattered ears flat against her head. Her amber eyes glowed in the gloom, like the moon in the dead of night. "Both of you, choose a kit." She ordered softly, as though the queen in the den could hear her voice.

Rowantail yawned and tottered lazily to the closest kit. It was a blue tabby and Rowantail looked it over with a glance before moving on to the next kit Halfthroat was examining. "I hate this," he grumbled before looking at the second kit, a rusty ginger tabby. This one had promise, but not exactly what Rowantail was looking for. *What* am *I looking for?* The thought ebbed in his mind as he saw the third kit. Padding over to it, Nightstar caught his eye and raised her eyebrow. Looking the kit over, it was a blue swirled tabby kit, and it didn't quite meet his expectations. *I guess the rusty one will do.* "I've chosen mine."

Halfthroat padded toward him, his tail kinked over his back. "Me too," he rumbled, looking back at the blue tabby kit.

Nightstar joined them, her eyes satisfied. "Me three," she added and stretched, arching her back. "I'd say we visit them when they have their eyes open."

Halfthroat cast his former apprentice an approving glance. "When

they're apprentices, we'll train them." Hastily, he added. "To become better warriors for their Clan."

Rowantail caught on and he nodded. "Of course," he meowed and together the three dark cats touched their noses to the kits' heads before padding out of the den. He was grateful that the moon provided enough light to see in the dark gloom. However, it reminded him of who he could've been had he not killed Deerstripe and Gorsewhisper all those moons ago. Tilting his head back, he peered up at the stars of Silverpelt. They glowed coldly, glittering in the black sky. *Could I have been among them? With the friends and family I'd lost?* He belly tightened and he shook his head. *StarClan is full of nothing but mouse-brained excuses of warriors. The Dark Forest is all I need.*

"Rowantail," Halfthroat's voice cut into his thoughts and he turned around. Nightstar had gone, presumably back to the Dark Forest, leaving him and her former mentor alone. "What are you thinking about?"

Rowantail narrowed his yellow eyes suspiciously at the warrior. Like Nightstar, he once was an OakClan warrior, respected and feared by the other Clans around the lake for his battle skill. However, he'd died to something as pathetic as an illness that only ever effected elders and kits. "None of your business." He growled.

The tom's green eyes glowed like the stars as he took a few paces toward Rowantail, making him stiffen. *One good blow to the neck and I'll be nothing more than a bad dream.* He thought darkly as he slid out his claws. "Keep your fur on," Halfthroat's voice was surprisingly non-threatening. "I'm not going to take you out of the world."

"Then what are you doing?" Rowantail kept his eyes pinned on the scarred tom, making sure he didn't miss anything about the way he was acting. The shadow hooding his green eyes, the scars across his neck rippling as he moved, the way his paws worked against the ground whenever he was nervous. "Trying to read my mind?"

Halfthroat shook his head, sitting down and staring absentmindedly at the sky. "I've no interest in what goes on in that crammed mind of yours." He meowed.

"I'm sensing a 'however'," Rowantail reluctantly half-sheathed his claws, unsure whether or not to trust the gray cat.

Halfthroat gave an amused snort and shook out his pelt. "However, I know you're wondering what life would've been like if you were up there." He jerked his muzzle to the stars of Silverpelt.

Rowantail looked up at the starry sky. "I thought you weren't trying to read my mind," he meowed dryly.

The tom half-laughed half-scoffed. "Your thoughts are mostly shown in your eyes," he pointed out and Rowantail scoffed. "I can tell what you're thinking about just by studying your eyes."

"Yeah, right," Rowantail shook his head. *Why am I even listening to this?* "And hedgehogs will fly." Rising to his paws, he glanced at Halfthroat. "You can go. I'll be back in a moment."

Halfthroat nodded and disappeared. It was like he wasn't there and Rowantail felt a pang of gratefulness to the tom that he'd listened for once. Turning around, Rowantail raced out of the camp, the wind catching his fur and making him feel like he was flying. The scents of the forest and prey wafted up his nose and his belly growled. He longed to sink his teeth into a juicy rabbit or vole, to taste the delicious meat of prey that *he'd* caught. But alas, the Dark Forest had no prey, not even a worm that a kit could eat. He could hardly remember the last time he'd tasted a mouse. It felt like so long ago when he'd been alive, running swiftly alongside his Clanmates.

Shaking out his fur to dislodge the memories of the moons gone, Rowantail hurled himself across the OakClan border. Suddenly, after running for a moment or two, he was on the path leading to GlacierClan's camp. The familiar ground beneath his paws felt springy and he longed to curl in a nest in the GlacierClan warrior's den, the scent of his Clanmates wrapping him in a blanket of comfort.

When he could see the slope leading down to the ravine where his former Clan resided, he skidded to a halt and padded cautiously to the peak. He remembered that as a 'paw, he'd been returning from a

long patrol and rolled all the way down the hill into the camp. It was good fun, and the kits would do the same, when they were under supervision, of course.

Wanting to feel the same way he did as an apprentice, Rowantail lowered himself to the ground and threw his weight to the left, launching himself down the steep slope. It was the best thing he'd ever done since his death. He hardly felt himself thudding against the ground as he yowled and squealed like a kit on its first day out of the nursery. He didn't want it to end, but when he slid to a halt, he rose to his paws and shook out his fur.

Seeing the two camp guards, Foxpelt and Hickorytree nobly sitting as still as stone, he felt a flicker of pride in his chest for GlacierClan. *Even after my death, they're still going strong.* With a broad grin on his face, he slipped between the bracken and stood at the entrance of the camp. Spotting the warrior's den in an instant, he trotted over and ducked inside. It was dark and Rowantail had to squint in order to see a bit clearer. At once, he made out the sleeping shape of a dark gray tabby tom. His flanks rose and fell rhythmically as he slept peacefully.

Rowantail's heart ached at the sight of his son. Hawkflight was a great warrior, but he didn't get to know his father as he was born after Rowantail had been exiled at the Gathering. Nonetheless, Rowantail loved his kits, even though his name was scorned by all the cats. After touching his nose to Hawkflight's head, he slipped out of the den and saw the pink and cream sky of dawn approaching and he hurried toward the medicine cat's den. He knew his only daughter chose the life of a medicine cat, but he didn't care. In fact, he couldn't be more proud of his two kits.

Poppypool was sleeping soundly in her moss-and-feather-lined nest. Her ear twitched as though she knew he was there, and something lit inside Rowantail and he longed to call out to her, to tell her how proud he was of her and Hawkflight. To tell her he was sorry to have been a horrible father to her and to beg for her forgiveness. He touched noses with Poppypool before padding out of the den and into the dawn light.

In a final act to see what he'd given up, Rowantail ducked into the

warrior's den for the last time. Scanning the rows of nests, he spotted the calico pelt of his mate. Tawnyheart seemed so at ease and peaceful now that Rowantail was gone. Padding nervously toward her, Rowantail crouched down beside her and curled his body around hers. Though he couldn't feel her, he breathed in her sweet scent and laid his chin on his paws and closed his eyes.

Chapter One

Emberburn lifted his head as Stoneblaze nudged him. "Wha-?" He mumbled, looking up at the tom. The warrior seemed wary of the tortoiseshell tom, and he eyed him as though he were a cornered fox.

"Er, Pebblewhisker wants you to lead the dawn patrol," he meowed, his voice tense.

"Who else is on the patrol?" Emberburn asked, slowly starting to wake up.

Stoneblaze avoided his gaze as he replied. "Hollyfire and Mosspelt," he twitched his ear and added. "You're going to the NightClan border."

Emberburn felt frustration bubble beneath his pelt at the sight of Stoneblaze's skepticism and he narrowed his eyes. When Stoneblaze saw his expression, he turned around and stalked out of the warrior's den. *Nightstar's been dead, you mouse-brain.* He wanted to screech at the blue-gray warrior. *You* helped *us kill her!* Emberburn sighed, pushed away his anger, and rose to his paws.

The dawn light was just making it through the trees that sheltered the DawnClan camp, warming Emberburn's back and making him purr softly. The three kits, Bumblekit, Splashkit, and Berrykit, were playing outside the nursery while their mother, Coppersight, watched them fondly.

Pride swelled in his chest as Splashkit pinned Bumblekit to the ground and trapped her sister. Emberburn watched in amusement as Berrykit snuck up on Splashkit and sprang onto her back, toppling her over with a yowl.

"Emberburn!" The warrior turned his attention away from the kits to see the deputy, Pebblewhisker, trotting toward him. The deputy's blue eyes were bright and friendly, so different from the wary looks

the rest of the Clan gave him and his littermates. "Good morning."

Emberburn smiled and dipped his head to the deputy. "Hello, Pebblewhisker," he forced himself to purr, recalling Stoneblaze's earlier wariness. "I heard you want me to lead the dawn patrol?"

Pebblewhisker nodded swiftly, his tail flicking to where Hollyfire and Mosspelt were waiting impatiently by the camp entrance. "Go along the NightClan border and come back when you reach the lakeshore." After a moment of thought, the deputy went on. "Hunt as you return." Casting a look out of the corner of his eyes, Pebblewhisker's eyes rested on the meager fresh-kill pile. "We need it right now."

The worry in the tom's mew clouded Emberburn's thoughts and he frowned. "Is something wrong?" He asked, unable to hold back the concern that trickled into his voice.

Pebblewhisker dropped his mew to a low whisper, and worry and sadness pooled in his eyes. "Lichenstar has whitecough," he whispered, his voice hoarse. Emberburn's eyes widened as the tom went on. "Rosefern and Leaffire have greencough. Shellfur doesn't know if they'll last through the season."

"They have to!" Emberburn protested, feeling alarm claw through his pelt. "The Clan needs them!"

Pebblewhisker sighed. "I know, but they've been sick for a few days." The deputy's shoulders slumped and Emberburn gulped, his ears drooping. "If only Shellfur had an apprentice. The poor cat can't handle any other sick cats."

Sympathy for the medicine cat washed over Emberburn. It was so strong and so sudden, it nearly knocked him off his paws. "I'd better lead the patrol," he meowed softly and licked Pebblewhisker comfortingly around the ears. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Pebblewhisker looked at him gratefully, before turning and sulking away with his tail dragging after him.

Emberburn watched him go and he sighed. Shaking out his pelt, he

headed for Hollyfire and Mosspelt as they waited for him. They were talking about something, but Emberburn was too distracted by his Clanmates being sick to hear.

"About time you showed up!" Hollyfire's teasing mew brought him back to the present. Emberburn glanced up at his littermates, and they were unaware of the sickness in the heart of their Clan.

Mosspelt must have seen the sullen look on his face because her eyes softened. "What's the matter?" She asked, her voice gentle.

A flash of gratefulness for his sisters flooded through Emberburn and he pressed against Mosspelt. As they headed out of the camp walls, Emberburn began to explain. "Lichenstar has whitecough," he meowed and his sisters' eyes widened in shock. "And Rosefern and Leaffire have greencough."

"That's horrible!" Exclaimed Hollyfire, her fluffy tail lashing behind her.

Mosspelt nodded in agreement. "I feel bad for Shellfur," she meowed. "He's going to be so tired and stressed since there's so much sickness."

Emberburn let out a sigh. "I wish I could help," he looked at his sisters, and saw sympathy reflecting in their eyes. He couldn't help but see Nightstar's eyes in Mosspelt's. Even though their mother's eyes were amber, Mosspelt had the closest color to amber. Hollyfire had bright green eyes and Emberburn was always told that he had the brightest heather-colored eyes in the forest. One day, he'd seen his reflection in a pool and confirmed the fact.

Hollyfire flicked his shoulder with her tail. "You can help Shellfur and us by not getting sick!" She remarked playfully and Emberburn's whiskers twitched in amusement. *Leave it to Hollyfire to make a serious topic light-hearted,* he thought with a purr.

Mosspelt grinned widely and her ears pricked. She sniffed the air and crouched down, racing into a clump of bracken without a word.

"Hey!" Hollyfire called after her, confusion coloring her voice. Emberburn frowned, wanting to hurl himself after his sister in case she was attacked.

The ferns quivered as Mosspelt padded toward them. In her jaws hang a plump rabbit, its soft fur stained with blood and its paws stained green.

"Nice catch!" Emberburn praised and looked hungrily at the prey, his mouth watering. "I bet Coppersight and the kit will enjoy that."

Mosspelt put her catch down sheepishly as she licked her chest in embarrassment. "It was a lucky catch," she meowed.

Hollyfire gazed in awe at the size of the rabbit. "Are you kidding?" She looked incredulously at Mosspelt, her eyes wide. "That wasn't luck! It was skill!"

Emberburn couldn't help but chime in. "Hollyfire's right, Mosspelt," he meowed, licking her cheek affectionately. He hesitated before saying, "Perhaps Nightstar taught you something good while she was your mentor."

Mosspelt flinched at his words and he instantly regretted it. Although it was rare that kin mentored kin, especially if it was a parent and kit, Nightstar made herself Mosspelt's mentor despite some surprised protests. "She wasn't a horrible mentor," Mosspelt mumbled, looking away with her ears flattened against her head. "She taught me some of the skills I needed to know."

Hollyfire's eyes narrowed and Mosspelt didn't meet her gaze. "Nightstar shouldn't have been your mentor in the first place," she meowed, her voice bitter and scathing. "You should have gotten a better mentor than that piece of rotting fox-dung!"

Mosspelt gasped, staring at Hollyfire with shock in her bright orange eyes. "She was a fine mentor!" She retorted, her voice strained and Emberburn felt a flash of alarm. "She just...didn't know how to be a good leader, that's all."

The tortoiseshell she-cat's shoulder fur began to bristle into spikes

and Emberburn's eyes narrowed. He wanted to shoulder his way between his fighting littermates, but he didn't know if that was a good idea. "Nightstar is a horrible, mange-pelted fox-heart!" Hollyfire shouted. "It's because of her that we're outcasts in our own Clan! It's because of her that we don't fit in! It's because of her that our father is dead!"

Emberburn gasped and stared at Hollyfire. "How could you say that?" He hissed, trying to keep himself calm. But the sight of Mosspelt flinching away and trying to hide in her pelt sent his anger flooding through him. He glared at Hollyfire, anger coursing through him like a tidal wave. "Thorntail died because of greencough, you know that! Nightstar didn't cause his death!"

Hollyfire flattened her ears and curled her lip to show her teeth. "Then she should have stopped trying to control the Clans!" She retorted, her voice tight with anger. "Nightstar wanted nothing but power and blood, the senior warriors and elders said so?"

"Just because a pawful of cats say the same thing," Emberburn shot back. "Doesn't mean it's true!" He wanted to believe that his mother was a selfish cat, but part of him wanted to believe the words of his Clanmates. "The elders are older than dirt, Hollyfire, and they could have bees in their brains! They were Nightstar's *friends*, in case you've forgotten that!"

Hollyfire's eyes burned with rage and she unsheathed her claws. "*You're* the one who has bees in your brain!" She shook her head and fire smoldered in her eyes. For a moment, she looked like Nightstar, angry and threatening. "You want to believe that Nightstar was innocent!"

"Maybe she was!" Emberburn flashed back and dug his claws into the dirt. He straightened and glared down at his sister, who was a whisker shorter than him. "Finish the patrol without me." He spat before shouldering past Hollyfire and stalking in the direction of the camp.

"Where are you going?" Hollyfire hissed as he went by her.

"Back to camp," Emberburn growled and didn't hear whatever his

sister said as he stalked away.

***

Back at the camp, the amount of coughing went from none, to all over the place. From the elder's den, Whiteblaze was being guided by Poppybee toward Shellfur's den. Firestep and Adderseed were already trudging toward the cave, their eyes and noses streaming.

A pang of disbelief hit Emberburn like a blow at the sight of the sick cats. *Everyone was fine this morning!* He bounded toward the elder's den, ducking inside where Echospeck and Halfsnow were speaking anxiously amongst each other.

Halfsnow glanced out of the corner of her eyes and saw Emberburn. "Welcome to our den," she purred dryly.

"Hi," Emberburn meowed sheepishly. The elders didn't seem wary or cautious around him like the rest of the Clan. Instead, they welcomed him and encouraged him to be the best warrior he could be. Settling down next to Echospeck, he looked at the two elders. "Is Whiteblaze going to be okay?"

Halfsnow glanced outside the den before replying. "I'm not entirely sure," she meowed honestly. "She's been coughing since last night."

"Why didn't she say anything?" Emberburn asked.

Echospeck let out a sigh. "Her pride clouds her ability to admit something's wrong with her." She looked at Emberburn and flicked her tail. "I heard that there'll be some new kits in the Clan."

Halfsnow's eyes glowed and Emberburn smiled. "I hear it's Snowshine and Lizardberry's first litter."

Echospeck's blue eyes glistened as she gazed at her denmate. "I bet you're very proud of Snowshine," she meowed softly.

Halfsnow nodded and her eyes clouded with sadness. "I bet Thorntail is proud of her as well," she whispered.

Emberburn's eyes widened slightly in surprise. *Why would Thorntail*

be proud of Snowshine? He wondered. "Why is that?" He asked.

Echospeck nudged him gently with her nose. "Thorntail may be your father, Emberburn, but he is also the father of Thornbite, Fennelfur, Snowshine, Branchstripe, and Patchsnow."

Emberburn tipped his head to the side. "Who is Thornbite?" He couldn't quite remember who his supposed half-sister was. *Perhaps she was killed.*

"Thornbite was my firstborn kit," Halfsnow's voice was soft and mournful. Emberburn turned his head and saw grief shadowing the elder's yellow eyes. "Fennelfur was her littermate, and the mother of Leaffire and Jaypaw."

"Jaypaw?" Emberburn echoed. There wasn't a cat with that name in the apprentice's den, he was sure.

"He died a long time ago," Echospeck explained. "Before you and your littermates were born."

"When Thorntail and your mother became mates," Halfsnow went on, "I was left in the dust. When you and your sisters were born, Thorntail had already joined StarClan and Thornbite was either dead or missing."

"Where did she go?"

Echospeck twitched her ears. "No cat knows," she answered. "If she's dead, the Clan never heard about it or forgot."

The idea of the Clan forgetting her dead kit made Halfsnow flinch in her nest. "I'm sure she's living a better life wherever she is." She meowed quickly. "In StarClan's hunting grounds, or elsewhere."

Emberburn sighed and rose to his paws, shaking out his thick fur. "I'd better go make myself useful around the camp," he meowed reluctantly. "I'll see you all later."

"Goodbye, Emberburn!" Echospeck meowed and shuffled closer to Halfsnow as the warrior left.

Suddenly at ease by the elder's company, Emberburn felt the earlier anger and hostility toward Hollyfire. Guilt began to claw at his belly, almost painful as he recalled leaving poor Mosspelt to whatever Hollyfire did after he left.

Letting out a sigh, he headed for the nursery where he knew Coppersight's three kits would be sleeping. When he ducked inside, he was surprised to see it was completely empty. Worry wormed into his chest and he slipped out of the den, scanning the camp for the kits and queen.

He relaxed when he spotted them playing by the apprentice's den. Coppersight threw a ball of moss over her kits' heads and watched lovingly as they chased eagerly after it, letting out squeals and squeaks as they did so.

A weight felt lifted from his shoulders at the sight of the carefree kits as they played together. *Hollyfire, Mosspelt, and I weren't like that as kits.* He thought with a pang of sadness and envy. *Berrykit, Splashkit, and Bumblekit get to grow up like normal kits.*

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Pebblewhisker's yowl cut through the crisp air as Emberburn shared a finch with Mosspelt.

Looking up from the half-eaten fresh-kill, Emberburn nudged his sister and together they left the prey to settle down with the rest of the Clan. When they sat down, many of the surrounding warriors shot them apprehensive glances and many curled their lips at them.

Mosspelt flinched away from them and Emberburn pressed supportingly against her, curling his tail around her. "They hate us," she whispered fearfully.

"Don't worry," he murmured, licking her ear comfortingly. "They'll see that Nightstar's shadow doesn't loom over us as they think." *I hope.* Returning the glares of his Clanmates, they looked away

awkwardly before glancing back up at Pebblewhisker.

"Cats of DawnClan, there is sickness in the camp at the current moment. Lichenstar now has greencough and to avoid further spread, I'm closing off the medicine cat's den and the leader's den until further notice." Pebblewhisker announced. "If you're sick, even if it's just a cough or sniffle, go see Shellfur."

There was a cough from the back of the crowd and Emberburn looked back to see Fallingash nudging Goosewing to his paws. Silently, the Clan watched as the two warriors headed for Shellfur's den.

"At any case," Pebblewhisker went on, slightly anxious. "I want at least two to three warriors in the camp at all times. Take turns leaving, resting, and guarding."

"But what about OakClan and NightClan?" Firestep called out. "They could attack us if they find out we have sickness our midst!"

Pebblewhisker flicked his ear in acknowledgment. "I have no doubt that the other three Clans have illness in their camps as well. If they choose to attack, it'll be useless and cause needless injury."

Emberburn nodded and Mosspelt let out a small murmur of agreement. *I don't think OakClan or NightClan want to attack us so soon after they lived side-by-side.* He thought and looked around his Clanmates.

"Meeting dismissed," Pebblewhisker finished and leaped down from the Jagged Stone.

Emberburn sighed and looked around. He saw Hollyfire stalking into the warrior's den and he debated calling after her but held back. *I'll apologize later.* He thought.

Mosspelt nudged him and gestured toward their finch. "Are you still hungry?" She asked quietly.

Emberburn watched Hollyfire's tail disappear into the den before speaking. "Yeah," he mumbled, feeling his previous hunger ebb

away and replaced by guilt. Following his sister back to the finch, he crouched beside Mosspelt and watched her take another bite.

"You didn't have to defend me," Mosspelt's voice was small and Emberburn cast her a sideways glance. "Hollyfire's always getting over her head."

"Of course I had to defend you!" He meowed, astonished. It was always his duty to defend his sisters, that's why he trained so hard to become a warrior.

Mosspelt didn't meet his eyes. "Hollyfire can have her opinions, Emberburn. Nightstar's effect on her is vastly different than how it affects us."

"Hollyfire's too busy fussing about herself to focus on those around her," Emberburn snorted and took a bite of the bird. "It's not my fault she's a mouse-brain."

Mosspelt nipped his ear sharply and he ducked his head with a small, short hiss. "She's probably under a lot of stress because of all that's happened." Turning her head, she gazed around at the Clan. No cat approached them, nor did they look at them with friendly eyes. Mosspelt lowered her voice and Emberburn's pelt prickled. "The Clan doesn't trust us since Nightstar died. They think we're some kind of deadly animal."

"We are trained to become warriors," Emberburn pointed out.

"I know that," Mosspelt meowed. "But warriors protect, not attack and kill without mercy. Nightstar's shadow looms over us, Emberburn."

Emberburn glared at his sister and scowled. "We're nothing like Nightstar," he growled and lashed his tail, suddenly no longer hungry as he pushed the finch toward her with a paw and stood. "I'm going to get some rest. I'll see you in the morning, Mosspelt." He meowed and stalked toward the warrior's den.

At once, he spotted Petaltail curl her lip in scorn and lay down in her nest, her eyes narrowed. Emberburn glared at his Clanmate and

headed for his nest at the back. When he curled in his nest, he closed his eyes and darkness consumed him.

Chapter Two

Emberburn watched as Pebblewhisker disappeared into the medicine cat's den, soon followed by Shellfur. The spotted gray medicine cat caught Emberburn's gaze and he blinked fearfully before hurrying after the deputy.

There was a shrill wail from inside the cave and Emberburn's heart dropped to his paws. *Some cat's dead,* he thought dreadfully. A lump grew in his throat as Pebblewhisker shot out of the cavern, his blue eyes wide and distressed.

"Lichenstar is dead!" He shrieked, his paws working against the ground as the Clan watched in shock.

"No!" The cry of Leaffire split the air and she crumbled to the ground, being comforted by Dustskip and Mistlesky.

Emberburn felt a pang of sympathy for the senior warrior. *They must've been really close.* He thought and dropped his head to study his tortoiseshell paws.

Pawsteps approaching him made him look up to see Mosspelt settling next to him, her tail curled tightly around him. Emberburn pressed against his sister, trying to block out Leaffire's cries.

Above him, the sky darkened and after a few heartbeats, it began to rain. The water soaked him to the bone but he couldn't feel the cold. He could hear his heart beating loudly in his ears, roaring over the thunder.

"He hunts with StarClan now," Mosspelt murmured in his ear, her breath ruffling his ear fur.

Emberburn sighed and nodded. "I know," he mumbled and flicked his tail around her.

There was a loud crack and Emberburn's pelt started to bristle. Looking up, there was a bright flash and Emberburn let out a screech of agony and it echoed throughout the camp. He fell to the ground and began to cry like a kit, his paws covering his eyes.

"Emberburn!" Mosspelt crouched down next to him and began to lap at his fur. "Are you okay?"

"M-My eyes!" He wailed, pawing feebly at his painful eyes. "Th-They hurt so much!"

There was a pause before Mosspelt called for Shellfur. As the medicine cat's pawsteps approached him, Mosspelt meowed in his ear. "You'll be alright, Emberburn." She meowed soothingly.

"I can already tell you looked directly into the flash," commented the voice of Shellfur. He nudged Emberburn's paws away from his eyes and gently licked the warrior's face.

Emberburn struggled to open his eyes and bright spots danced in front of him. Pain seared through his face and he let out a whimper before screwing his eyes shut once more.

"Your eyes are not permanently damaged," Shellfur meowed and nosed the tom to his paws. "But you have to stay in my den for a while."

Mosspelt's concerned mew reached Emberburn's ears. "Who else hurt their eyes?" She asked and Emberburn pictured her bright orange gaze scanning the rest of the camp.

Shellfur let out a sigh. "Quite a few," he meowed and Emberburn let out a whimper. "Come on, Emberburn, let's get you to my den." As they hobbled toward the cave, Shellfur spoke. "Hollyfire visited me yesterday when she came back from the dawn patrol." He meowed quietly.

Alarm flashed through Emberburn and he would've narrowed his eyes if he could. "Why?" He asked, suddenly uneasy at the tone in the medicine cat's voice.

He pictured Shellfur casting him a surprised glance and he hesitated

before speaking again. "Haven't you noticed she's been really plump these past few days?"

At first, Emberburn scrunched up his nose as he pictured his sister being fat and he realized with a jolt that the medicine cat was right. "So?" He snorted. "She could just be eating a lot more than her share."

Emberburn felt the medicine cat's tail touch his shoulder lightly before whisking it away. "I believe Hollyfire is expecting kits, Emberburn." He meowed evenly.

Emberburn jerked away from the tom with a sharp hiss and he tried to open his eyes but kept them shut from the pain. "I doubt my sister would waste her time with a pawful of mewling lumps of fur." He growled in protest.

"Emberburn," Shellfur cut him off and guided him to a moss-lined nest. As he stepped into the nest, he settled down and rested his chin on his front paws. "Hollyfire doesn't spend much time in the camp." He pressed.

Hot rage flooded through Emberburn and he quickly snapped. "Are you calling my sister disloyal?" His voice was a harsh growl and he flexed his claws, working them against the moss nest.

Shellfur let out a sigh and his pawsteps retreated before returning quickly. Emberburn smelled the sharp tang of herbs and he curled his lip in distaste. "Hollyfire is expecting some cat's kits," he meowed, his mouth full of whatever herb he was chewing. "And I'm certain the father isn't in our Clan."

Emberburn let out a growl, but it was cut short when juice splattered against his face and trickled into his eyes. He let out a painful screech and his claws shredded the moss that lay below him. "Oww!" He wailed. "What was *that*?"

Shellfur purred with amusement and Emberburn wanted to glare at the medicine cat, but the agony in his eyes held him back. "That was celandine," he meowed. "It'll help with your eyes."

"Get it off me!" Emberburn ordered, shaking his head to get rid of the stinging juice that clung to his face like a flea.

Shellfur shot forward and held a paw with a leaf of something pressed against his eyes. He let out another cry of pain and tried to get free, but Shellfur ordered him to stay still. "This'll keep back any infection that might settle in." He told him.

Emberburn wanted to shred the tom's ears until he cried for mercy. "It hurts!" He protested. "It'll heal without you hurting me even more!"

"If you get an infection," Shellfur meowed, his voice firm. "I'd like to see you try to deal with it. Now lie still, and stop talking."

As Shellfur worked, Emberburn's head spun as a million thoughts gathered in his mind. *Hollyfire is expecting kits? Who's the father? Why didn't she tell me and Mosspelt?*

"Emberburn," Shellfur's voice was soft and Emberburn lifted his head. "She's extremely close to giving birth, and the amount of stress the Clan is under won't help her."

"What do you want me to do?" Emberburn hissed. "I'm no medicine cat."

Shellfur touched his nose to Emberburn's ear and sighed softly. "Emberburn, you and your littermates have lost so much since you were born. Hollyfire needs the support of her only brother in order to get through her pregnancy."

Emberburn felt defeated as he sank to the ground, his chin resting on the moss. "I don't know if I can," he meowed honestly. "I don't know the first thing about raising a family."

Shellfur let out a laugh. "Just do your best and do what you can for Hollyfire and the kits."

Emberburn nodded and rested his chin on his paws and waited for himself to drift off into sleep.

Chapter Three

Shellfur unwrapped Emberburn's eyes and took a step back as the warrior blinked open his eyes. "How does that feel?" He questioned.

Emberburn winced as the light was overbearing and he shook his head, trying to clear his vision. When his eyes adjusted to the light and focused, he let out a relieved sigh. Shellfur was sitting just in front of him, his eyes gleaming with concern and worry. "I can see!"

Shellfur relaxed and sighed with relief. "That's good," he purred and carried the used herbs out of the den to bury them.

A few days had gone by since the death of Lichenstar and Emberburn's eyes had healed nicely. Along with his eyes, he got used to the fact that Hollyfire was expecting an unknown cat's kits.

Rising to his paws, he dipped his head to Shellfur as the medicine cat returned. "Am I free to go?" He asked eagerly, his paws itching to get out of the den.

Shellfur nodded and stopped him before he could dash off. "Remember what I told you about Hollyfire and her kits," he cautioned and flicked his ear. "She'll be having them any day now, so be careful. Queens are very protective of their litters."

Emberburn hesitated before nodding. "Thanks, Shellfur." He meowed and bounded out of the cave. Once he was outside, he spotted Hollyfire stumbling out of the warrior's den, her swollen flanks swaying and making her clumsy. "Hey, are you alright?" He asked as he approached his sister.

Hollyfire looked up at him and narrowed her eyes. "I see your eyes are healed now," she meowed, her voice wary.

Emberburn nodded and glanced at her sides. "I heard that you're expecting kits," he meowed, trying to keep his voice calm and even. "Who's the father?"

Hollyfire's eyes started to blaze as she glared at Emberburn. "That's none of your business!" She spat and the tom recoiled in shock. Her eyes softened a little and the fur along her spine flattened with an effort. "I can't tell you who the father is, just that he's chosen to be absent from his kits' lives." She meowed quietly.

Emberburn nodded understandingly. "I can help you with them if you want," he offered. He didn't want to tell his sister Shellfur told him to help.

Hollyfire's eyes glowed with appreciation and she nodded slowly. "Thanks, Emberburn." She meowed. Suddenly, pain flashed in her eyes and she staggered, falling onto her side with a grunt of pain.

Emberburn's eyes widened and he crouched beside her, panic sparking through him. "Hollyfire? Are you okay?" He asked, his heart starting to pound in his chest.

Hollyfire began to pant, her flanks heaving. "It-it's the kits," she breathed, her eyes pained as she looked up at him. "They-they're coming."

Emberburn felt the time slow and he leaped up, spun on his heels, and let out a yowl. "Shellfur! Come quick!"

At once, the medicine cat rushed out of his den, his fur spiked. "What? What's the matter?" He demanded. His eyes slid passed Emberburn and rested on Hollyfire. "Stay with her and I'll be right back," Shellfur ordered and turned his head, searching out another cat. "Some cat get Mosspelt! And get a stick!"

Emberburn turned back to his sister as the medicine cat darted back to his den. Crouching beside her, he lapped gingerly at her tortoiseshell pelt. "Hold on, Hollyfire." He whispered, hating how useless he felt. "Help is coming."

Hollyfire didn't answer as paws thundered toward them and Shellfur nosed Emberburn away from the she-cat. As Emberburn paced helplessly along the length of the warrior's den, a cat approached him. Looking up, he saw Mosspelt, her eyes were wide and nervous as she risked a glance at Hollyfire as she let out a

pained screech.

Emberburn's ears flattened against his head and he ground his teeth together, unable to witness his sister's unbearable pain. *StarClan, don't make her suffer!* He pleaded, but he knew his plead would go unheard.

A flash of bright ginger tabby fur flew by him as Gingerheart crouched behind Hollyfire, a stick clasped firmly between his teeth. Emberburn pressed against Mosspelt as Hollyfire let out another shriek of pain.

"It's a tom!" Cried Shellfur. Dipping his head, the medicine cat turned to Emberburn and put the kit at his paws. "Lick him, Emberburn. Get his blood flowing and keep him warm." Before waiting for a reply, Shellfur turned back around.

Emberburn stared in awe at the small bundle at his paws. It was very tiny and it's ears and eyes were closed. Bending down, he rasped his tongue over the little kit and it let out a shrill cry the moment he touched it. It was a black tom with some white splotches and Emberburn wondered what eye color the little thing would have.

"A she-cat!" Shellfur meowed. This time, he gave the kit to Mosspelt and Emberburn's heart felt like it would explode. His niece was a dark ginger tabby with adorable little paws.

Mosspelt leaned over and gently started to lick the little kit. A tiny paw hit his nose and Emberburn looked down to see the kit he was licking was wriggling like a worm and letting out hungry cries.

"Another tom," Shellfur purred and Emberburn picked up his kit by his tiny scruff and carried him carefully toward its mother. As he nosed the kit to the curve of Hollyfire's belly, he couldn't stop staring at the black tom-kit.

He looked so much like Nightstar that Emberburn couldn't help but see his mother clearly in the small kitten. *Hopefully, Hollyfire doesn't name him Nightkit.* He thought and pushed it away as he shook his head. *These kits are my kin, and I would die to protect them.*

"You did a good job, Hollyfire." Mosspelt meowed, her voice soft as she gazed down at the three kits. "There's three of them, just like us."

Hollyfire nodded weakly and Emberburn felt a bolt of pride and love for his sister. "Why don't we name them?" She wheezed, sounding exhausted.

Emberburn hesitated and nodded. He looked at the dark tabby she-cat. "Russetkit," he suggested.

Mosspelt touched her nose to the tortoiseshell tom's rump. "Whiskerkit," she purred.

Hollyfire purred and nodded before looking at the black kit. A troubled look flashed across her face before she spoke. "Moonkit," she decided and staggered to her paws.

Her kits let out cries of protest, making Emberburn's heart crack. He wanted to curl around the three little kittens and lap at their feather-soft fur until they fell asleep. But, he knew he'd only be chased away by Hollyfire with a few scratches and bites.

He knew more than anything that a mother cat would do anything to protect her kits, especially her first litter. Hollyfire was no different, though she seemed more fierce and ferocious than another queen.

Hollyfire picked up little Russetkit by her scruff and nudged the other two toms toward the nursery, limping but her eyes shone brightly with pride.

"Emberburn! Mosspelt!" The Clan's new deputy, Fennelfur, padded toward them. There was a fire in her eyes as she approached the two siblings and her tail lashed back and forth.

"What is it, Fennelfur?" Mosspelt asked, rising to her paws to join her brother. "Is something wrong?"

The deputy nodded, her eyes flashing with silent doubt as she gazed at them. "OakClan has been scented on our territory by the border." She meowed. "Take Streampool and Branchstripe with you and send

them away with some nasty bites and scratches."

Emberburn flexed his claws and dipped his head. "Of course, Fennelfur." He meowed, looking to his sister. "Go fetch Streampool and Branchstripe and I'll meet you by the camp entrance." He ordered.

Mosspelt nodded and ran off to find the other warriors. Emberburn gave one final look at the nursery and headed for the camp's entrance.

***

It wasn't long until the patrol found the OakClan trespassers as they fought their way through the undergrowth. Emberburn narrowed his eyes as he saw Wolfstripe, Amberheart, and Talonclaw holding prey.

Branchstripe bared his teeth and his neck fur bristled. "First they cross the border, *then* they steal prey." He growled and looked at Emberburn.

Emberburn narrowed his eyes at the OakClan warriors and unsheathed his claws. "Get ready," he warned his patrol and crouched down. Bunching his muscles to spring, he let out a yowl and charged forward, coming head-to-head with Amberheart.

"Get out of our territory!" Streampool screeched as he leaped for Wolfstripe, aided by Mosspelt.

Amberheart dropped the piece of prey she was holding and reared up to meet Emberburn's attack. She bared her teeth and shoved the tom back.

His hind paws slid on the muddy ground and wet leaves and brought Amberheart down with him with a *thump*. His claws dug into her shoulders as he tried to regain his balance. Twisting around, Emberburn sank his teeth deep into her shoulder and rolled her onto her back, her belly exposed. Amberheart let out a shriek of pain as he lunged for her soft belly, trying desperately to get the upper hand.

Agony seared in his chest as the ginger-and-white she-cat clawed at his chest. He stumbled back and watched as Amberheart scrambled to her paws and glared at Emberburn before darting towards him. She dove underneath him and leaped onto his back, shoving him to the ground.

Emberburn yelped in pain as she churned her hind claws into his back. She slashed at his ears and blood started to trickle into his eyes, half-blinding him as he tried to get free. He writhed beneath the OakClan she-cat and felt panic flash through him as he was pressed against the ground.

There was a scrambling of paws, a flash of fur, and the weight was lifted off his back as Amberheart was thrown clear off him. Leaping to his paws, he spun around to see Mosspelt facing him. His sister was bleeding from a torn ear and three claw marks on her right shoulder. In spite of this, her eyes burned brightly as she and Emberburn cornered Amberheart. He curled his lip into a snarl and Mosspelt let out a threatening growl.

Amberheart's green eyes blazed with anger before she spun around and retreated into the trees. Emberburn felt a flash of triumph as he shared a proud look with his sister.

Behind them, there was a yowl of pain and a *thud* as a cat landed on the ground. Emberburn and Mosspelt spun around, and the tom's heart sank at what he saw.

Talonclaw stood over Streampool, his green eyes wide with horror as his paw dripped with blood. Emberburn looked down at his Clanmate, who lay motionless, his eyes glazed. *He's dead.* Looking up at the OakClan tom, he saw the fear that glistened in his eyes.

"Streampool!" Branchstripe trotted toward them, his tail high. "We won! We-" When his eyes rested on his fallen Clanmate, he let out a wail of grief and glared at Talonclaw. "You killed him!"

Talonclaw sheathed his claws and took a few steps back as Mosspelt ran to Streampool's side. "I-I didn't mean to!" He protested, looking down at the fallen warrior.

Emberburn felt numb as he hurled himself at the silver-and-white tabby tom, paws outstretched. Talonclaw fell onto his back without fighting back. "Honorable warriors do not kill in battle!" He spat, glaring down at the startled tom. Reaching over, he grasped Talonclaw's scruff in his jaws and threw him toward the trees. "Get out!" He shouted.

Talonclaw lowered his head and, with one final glance at Streampool's body, turned tail and raced after his fleeing Clanmates.

Emberburn watched him leave and turned back to Mosspelt, who was trying to get Streampool's limp form onto her back. After watching her struggle for a moment longer, Emberburn padded over and took all of Streampool's weight on his back.

"Let's get back to camp," Branchstripe meowed, his eyes dark and unreadable. "Streampool didn't deserve to die."

***

Emberburn staggered under the dead warrior's weight, nearly falling as the entered the camp. His shoulders ached from carrying Streampool and he longed to sleep in his nest.

Mistlesky was the first cat to notice their return and she let out a wail of grief at the sight of Streampool's body splayed across Emberburn's back.

"Pebblestar!" Branchstripe yowled, his tail lashing and fur bristling with rage. "Pebblestar!"

Emberburn carefully turned his head, grasped Streampool's scruff between his teeth and set him gently on the ground. He let out a sigh as Pebblestar shot out of his den, followed by Shellfur and the rest of the Clan.

"How did this happen?" The leader demanded as he skidded to a halt, looking down at Streampool.

"OakClan," Emberburn spat, his rage returning and he dug his claws into the dirt. "Talonclaw struck him down without mercy."

Fennelfur stepped forward, her eyes flashing from Streampool to Emberburn, then Branchstripe, then to Pebblestar. Doubt clouded her eyes and she spoke boldly. "Talonclaw is a young warrior," she pointed out. "It could've been an accident."

Branchstripe rounded on the deputy, eyes sparkling with anger. "Of course you would defend OakClan's warriors!" He spat, hate filling his words.

Fennelfur's eyes narrowed as she looked at her younger brother. "What's that supposed to mean?" She challenged. "You've had no reason to doubt my loyalty to DawnClan, so why doubt me now?"

Branchstripe glared at her for a moment longer before looking away, unable to hold her gaze for long.

She turned to her nephew. "Pebblestar, what will we do about this?" She asked, casting Branchstripe a glance before going on. "Streampool's death could've been an honest mistake."

Pebblestar was quiet and Emberburn felt irritation prick his paws. He stepped forward and spoke before his leader, something he'd never done before.

"It's obvious what should be done," he growled, looking around at his Clanmates. "OakClan took the life of a noble warrior, we should attack their camp at once!"

There were some murmurs of agreement that swept through the Clan, and a voice called out.

"Who would've thought you would suggest that?" The voice was Gingerheart. The tom was glaring suspiciously at Emberburn, claws unsheathed. "After all, your mother only believed in violence. The seed doesn't fall far from the tree."

Emberburn felt his neck fur starting to bristle as he glared at the tabby warrior. "You didn't seem so hesitant to help Hollyfire with her kitting," he retorted. "She is, if you didn't notice, my sister and the daughter of Nightstar."

"At least she *tries* to not be like her," snorted Gingerheart as he

flicked his tail dismissively. "You just want to jump straight into battle." Resting his blue eyes on Emberburn's unsheathed claws, he added. "Just like your mother."

Emberburn was about to speak when Pebblestar's tail flicked over his mouth. The Clan leader's eyes were dark and he turned away from Streampool's body. "I've thought about this, and I must agree with Emberburn." He meowed. "We must get revenge on OakClan and avenge Streampool's sacrifice. We attack in a quarter moon."

As Pebblestar and Fennelfur headed for the leader's den, the Clan prepared for the long vigil for Streampool. Halfsnow, Poppybee, and Echospeck began arranging Streampool's body as though he were sleeping.

Emberburn padded up to the elders, his heart heavy and his wounds stinging. "How is Whiteblaze?" He asked in a low voice.

Echospeck sighed and faced the warrior. "She's gotten no better," she replied, her voice tired. Emberburn saw rings of dark purple under her eyes and felt alarm spark through him. "She doesn't need to see the body of her kit right now."

Emberburn sighed and lowered his head. Turning away, he padded toward Shellfur's den to get his injuries treated. *I shouldn't have left Streampool to fight Talonclaw alone.*

***

As the sun began to set, Emberburn finished off the rest of his mouse and rose to his paws, stretching. His wounds were plastered with herbs and cobwebs, stinging like thorns sticking into his pelt.

Mosspelt ducked out of the nursery and crossed the clearing to her brother. Emberburn looked at his sister and searched her gaze. As though reading his eyes, she spoke in a soft, gentle voice. "Hollyfire and the kits are just fine." She purred, then faltered and Emberburn tilted his head. "She's worried about Moonkit, though. He wouldn't respond to any of her words."

"They are only a few days old," Emberburn pointed out, but couldn't

help but feel worry settling in his belly.

Mosspelt glanced over her shoulder back at the nursery and sighed. "I know that, but Hollyfire is still nervous about him." She looked back at her brother. "Are you going to attend Streampool's vigil?" She asked, her voice a low whisper.

Emberburn shook his head, ignoring the wide-eyed look his sister was giving him. "Streampool and I were never close," he explained. "I'm tired from the patrol. You and attend the vigil if you want, and I'll see you in the morning."

Mosspelt nodded and pressed her muzzle against his before padding away toward Streampool's body. Emberburn looked around and saw no cat watching him. Taking the chance, he headed for the warrior's den and ducked inside. Heading for his nest, he curled in a ball and closed his eyes.

Chapter Four

"Ha!" Whiskerkit flung himself at Emberburn, paws outstretched as he landed squarely on the warrior's muzzle. "I got you!"

Emberburn chuckled and licked at the kit's belly, making him topple onto his back with a squeak. Tiny claws pricked his tail and he let out an exaggerated grunt of pain and fell onto his side with a *thump*.

Russetkit jumped onto his belly and scrambled to his face. Her paws battered his muzzle and cheek, and her light yellow eyes glimmered with delight. "Take this, you filthy badger!" She squeaked.

Emberburn blinked up at her with mock fear. "Please don't shred me!" He pleaded, raising his paws to defend himself. "You're too powerful!"

Russetkit puffed out her chest with pride as she stood on his shoulder. At a half-moon old, Hollyfire's kits amazed Emberburn with their ability to be all over the nursery and still having the energy to play.

Whiskerkit bit into Emberburn's ear and wrestled with it. The kit's tiny teeth felt like tiny thorns, so it didn't hurt him much. He pushed the tom-kit away with a paw and picked Russetkit up by her scruff and set her down next to her brother.

"Why don't you play with each other for a while?" He suggested, blinking down at the two kits. "I need to speak with Moonkit."

Russetkit tipped her head to one side, confusion clear in her light yellow gaze. "Why?" She squeaked, casting her patched brother a strange glance. "He won't talk to you."

"Yeah," Whiskerkit agreed. "He doesn't talk to any cat."

Alarm flashed through Emberburn but he gave the kits a half-

hearted smile. "Don't worry," he meowed. "I'll take care of it." With a wink at the two kits, he rose to his paws and headed for Moonkit.

Moonkit was sitting outside the nursery, watching as the Clan carried on with their duties. Since Streampool's death, the entire Clan had been on-edge and tension was thick in the air.

"Moonkit," Emberburn meowed. To his surprise, the kit didn't even flick his ear at him, nor did he look over his shoulder. "Moonkit?" Still nothing. "Moonkit!" He raised his voice slightly, but to no avail. *This kit was born deaf.* Emberburn flinched when the suddenly turned around and grinned open-mouthed up at him.

"Hi!" He squeaked and Emberburn took a step back, surprised. "Who are you?"

Taken aback by the kit's sudden speech, he just stared at down at Moonkit. Regaining his composure, he tried to speak. "My name is Emberburn."

Moonkit cocked his head to the side, his gaze fixed on his mouth. "Amberworm?" He questioned and Emberburn couldn't help but laugh. "Your name is Amberworm?"

Emberburn shook his head and tried again. Instead of speaking, he mouthed his name.

Moonkit tilted his head before his face brightened. "Emberburn?" He asked. Emberburn's eyes widened and he nodded, satisfaction flooding through him. "Hi, Emberburn!"

Emberburn waved his tail at the kit, inviting him to sit down next to him. Moonkit trotted over and settled down next to him, looking up at the warrior with wide amber eyes. Scraping some moss together into a ball, he flung it away and watched the kit scamper after it with a few squeals of delight. When he grasped it in his mouth, Emberburn patted the ground with his paw and Moonkit turned around before dashing back to him.

Delight that he'd been able to communicate with the deaf kit filled him from ears to tail tip. He threw the moss-ball a few more times,

each time calling him back by patting the ground.

"I see you two are getting along just fine," purred the soft voice of Hollyfire as she slid out of the nursery and sat down next to her brother. Her eyes rested on her son and she licked the top of his head. "Hello, Moonkit." She meowed.

Moonkit frowned up at his mother and looked at Emberburn expectantly. Realizing the moss-ball was at his paws, he hooked it with a claw and flung it away once more.

"Didn't he hear me?" Hollyfire asked, looking up at her brother in confusion. "He looked at me like he didn't recognize me."

A lump grew in his throat and he took a deep breath before answering hesitantly. "Moonkit's deaf, Hollyfire." He explained and looked down as the tiny tom trotted towards him and dropped the ball of moss at his paws. He threw it again and let out a sigh. "I'm sorry."

Hollyfire's eyes clouded and she watched as Emberburn patted the ground and Moonkit charged back, the moss-ball dangling from his jaws. "What are you doing?" She asked.

"I'm telling him to come back," Emberburn explained. "He can feel the vibrations of my paw hitting the ground and he runs right back to me."

Hollyfire stared at him as though he'd grown a second tail. "That's amazing!" She exclaimed and looked at Moonkit. "Let me try." Hooking the moss with a claw, she threw it halfway across the clearing and watched her son hurl himself after it. When he got the green ball, she patted the ground and, like normal, he came running back. "Wow."

Emberburn licked Moonkit's head and he let out a small purr. "Are you still going to call him Moonkit?" He asked, looking at his sister curiously.

Her eyes darkened and she looked down at her son. His amber eyes were wide and oblivious as he nudged the moss-ball towards her.

She threw it again before answering. "I don't know," she admitted. "I'm considering changing his name."

"To what?"

"Deafkit." The words struck Emberburn and he gaped at his sister with wide, unblinking eyes. *What a cruel name!* He thought with a shudder. "It'll suit him better than Moonkit," Hollyfire explained hastily.

"But his deafness isn't his fault!" Emberburn protested, his tail flicking nervously. Moonkit didn't deserve to be named something so horrible.

Hollyfire closed her eyes before looking up at him. "He's my son," she meowed, her voice firm. "And I'll decide what his name is." Stamping her paw on the ground, Moonkit followed his mother back into the nursery.

"Emberburn!" The call of Fennelfur distracted the warrior from his sister and nephew and he turned around. Padding toward the deputy, she flicked her tail. "The attack patrol is just about to leave, go join them."

Emberburn flexed his claws and nodded. He headed for the battle patrol, eager to fight for his Clan. The patrol consisted of Dustskip, Stoneblaze, Gingerheart, Mosspelt, Firestep, Branchstripe, Lizardberry, Coppersight, and Fallingash.

Pebblestar was at the front of the patrol, speaking to Shellfur. Emberburn couldn't hear what the two toms were saying, but he didn't mind. Turning around, he tried to seek out Mosspelt.

His sister was talking shyly with Gingerheart, her cheeks flushed. Gingerheart's eyes were soft as he spoke to Mosspelt and smiled gently down at her. Mosspelt laughed at something he said and her eyes met Emberburn's.

Emberburn was surprised to see her having a good time with the usual judgmental tom, but he nodded and turned away. Across the clearing at the nursery, Hollyfire's eyes were watching him.

His sister's eyes were unreadable from how far he was from her, but she blinked, breaking eye contact, and padded away. Emberburn felt frustration boil beneath his pelt as she nosed her kits into the nursery.

Something touched his shoulder and he turned his head to see Firestep. "Come on," he meowed, his eyes flashing to the nursery then back to Emberburn. "We're heading out."

Emberburn looked at the tom and nodded. Sending one final look at where his sister had gone, he bounded after the patrol.

***

"Keep quiet and wait for my signal," hissed Gingerheart as Emberburn stalked up to his side. They were surrounding the OakClan camp and were just waiting for the first signal.

"The plan is to overrun the Clan with one group of cats to barge in at a time." Pebblestar had said before they'd split into groups.

Emberburn was with Firestep, Gingerheart, and Stoneblaze. He saw some of the warriors calmly going through their day. No patrols had been sent out but none had returned.

Gingerheart narrowed his eyes and flicked his tail. Emberburn dug his claws into the ground and used it to propel himself forward. Side-by-side with his Clanmates, he bounded toward the camp's rear entrance. Why they have one was a mystery to Emberburn.

Exploding through the rear entrance, Emberburn flung himself at the nearest cat. The cat, who he noticed was Rowanflower, didn't notice him until he raked her shoulder with his claws.

"Invaders!" Rowanflower shrieked. She spun on her heels and reared on her hind legs, swiping at Emberburn's ears. Emberburn cuffed her ears with his forepaw and she staggered. Taking advantage of her dazed state, Emberburn leaped at her and sank his teeth into her shoulder, knocking her to the ground.

Rowanflower writhed under him and her hind paws connected with his chest. Emberburn released the hold on her shoulder and

stumbled back, trying to steady his breathing as the pain in his chest flared up. The dark ginger she-cat scrambled up and slashed his muzzle with her claws, spraying blood onto the grass.

"Get out of our camp, you mange-pelt!" She screeched. Darting to the side to avoid her claws, he sank his teeth into her tail and clawed at her hind legs. Rowanflower reared on her hind legs and Emberburn pounced on her back, digging his claws into her flesh and slashing wildly.

There was a yowl as the clearing broke into battle. Growling, Emberburn sank his teeth into her scruff and tried to flip her onto her back so he could spring free and pin her.

Claws raked down his back and he let out a yowl of pain, releasing Rowanflower and she rolled away. Turning on her paws, she scratched his cheek.

Emberburn let out a yelp as the second cat pinned him to the ground. Twisting his head around, he sank his teeth into a paw and the cat let out a howl of anger.

Scrambling to his paws, he came face-to-face with not only Rowanflower but Rowanflower *and* the Clan deputy, Goldenfire.

The large golden deputy reared on his hind legs and swiped at Emberburn's muzzle. Pain shot through his face and Emberburn staggered, nearly falling before Rowanflower raked his shoulder with her thorn-sharp claws.

I can't fight them both! Panic sparked through him and he whirled around, sinking his teeth into Rowanflower's forepaw and twisting it. Rowanflower let out an ear-splitting shriek and fell onto her back, paws flailing as she tried to escape. Letting go of her paw, he spun around and swiped at Goldenfire, only for him to jerk back and scratch his leg.

"Duck!" Emberburn dropped to the ground at the sound of Gingerheart's warning and the tabby tackled Goldenfire, taking the deputy by surprise.

Relief flooded through Emberburn as Gingerheart and Firestep overtook the OakClan warriors and allowed him to find a different target. Bounding toward the screeches of his Clanmates, he saw Dustskip wrestling with Blueheart. The tom was bleeding from a gash on his shoulder and he looked exhausted as the she-cat scored more blows on him.

Rage exploded in Emberburn's chest and he hurled himself at Blueheart. He knocked her away with his shoulder and heard a grunt of appreciation from the senior warrior. He slashed at her face, ducked to avoid her claws, and raked her cheek.

Blueheart hissed and backed away, panting and glaring at Emberburn. "Alright," she spat hatefully. "You've won."

Emberburn lifted his chin in triumph before checking on Dustskip. The senior warrior was not in good shape. He staggered and fell while trying to leave the camp. Padding toward him, he took Dustskip's weight on his wounded shoulder and winced. Pushing through the pain, he helped the injured tom toward the camp entrance and watched him get supported by Stoneblaze, who was limping from a wound on his hind leg.

"DawnClan, retreat!" Fennelfur's yowl split the battle-worn air and Emberburn spun on his heels searching through the mass of fleeing warriors for his sister, Clan deputy, and Clan leader.

Mosspelt bounded up to him. "What are you waiting for?" She panted, her flanks heaving. She didn't seem to be badly hurt, just a few scratches and clumps of fur missing.

Emberburn spotted Fennelfur and Pebblestar fleeing close behind Branchstripe Coppersight. Feeling relieved that they were alright, he turned around and raced after his Clanmates.

***

"Why did you call us to retreat?" Branchstripe spat at Fennelfur as they returned. The warrior's pelt was bristling into spikes despite his wounds and his dark blue eyes blazed with fury and anger. "We would've won!"

Fennelfur's eyes flashed and she lashed her tail once. "We would've lost more than the battle if we carried on." She retorted and blinked at her brother. "We had to retreat if we wanted all of our Clanmates to survive."

Branchstripe looked like he was about to burst with anger. "Does Streampool's death mean nothing to you?" He demanded, his voice tight with rage. Emberburn gasped in shock as the warrior shoved his face close to the deputy's. "Do you not respect your dead warriors?"

"That's *enough*, Branchstripe," Fennelfur growled and met his glare with her own. "Streampool died a warrior's death, and I do respect my fallen warriors." Her eyes were mere slits as she looked at her brother. "How dare you challenge my loyalty to my Clanmates?"

Branchstripe was about to retort before Shellfur's voice cut him off. Emberburn saw the warrior's claws were unsheathed and digging into the dirt, as though he'd spring at the deputy without hesitation.

"Dustskip walks with StarClan now," he meowed, his voice hoarse and grave. Emberburn blinked. *I knew his wounds looked bad, but not that bad!*

Stoneblaze let out a yowl of grief and Emberburn felt a pang of sympathy for the tom. Stoneblaze, Rosefern, Petaltail, and Mistlesky were Dustskip's siblings and Echospeck's son. Emberburn lowered his head to stare sadly at his paws. *I should've shredded Blueheart when I had the chance!* He thought, anger starting to pulse beneath his pelt, hot like fire.

Silence fell upon the warriors, even Branchstripe seemed ruffled by the senior warrior's death. He sheathed his claws with noticeable effort before storming off into the warrior's den.

There was movement out of the corner of Emberbunr's eye and he lifted his head as Pebblestar heaved himself on the top of the Jagged Stone. His blue eyes were misted with grief and sorrow as he raised his voice. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" His call

rattled with anxiety and Emberburn felt sympathetic for the tom. This was the first death since he'd become the leader.

As the cats who were getting their wounds treated limped out of the medicine cat's den, he went on.

"Dustskip's death is tragic, and we will sit vigil for our fallen Clanmate." He meowed shakily. "But, we have three kits among us who have reached their third moon and are ready to become apprentices." Pebblestar looked over at the nursery where Berrykit, Splashkit, and Bumblekit were waiting excitedly. "Come forward, you three."

Bumblekit blazed ahead from her littermates, followed by Berrykit and Splashkit.

"From this moment on, until you have earned your warrior names, you will be known as Bumblepaw and Berrypaw," Pebblestar announced. Turning his head, he looked at Petaltail. "Petaltail, you are a quick and strong warrior, I trust you to teach Berrypaw to be a great warrior." He blinked at the she-cat and went on. "Gingerheart, you are a fierce fighter and talented hunter, and I trust that you will pass on all you know onto Bumblepaw."

The Clan raised their voices into a chant. "Bumblepaw! Berrypaw!"

Pebblestar flicked his tail and the cheers fell silent. "Splashkit has decided to walk the path as the next medicine cat of DawnClan." He meowed and his eyes grew soft. "Splashkit, until you have earned your medicine cat name, you will be known as Splashpaw. Shellfur is a loyal and patient medicine cat, and I know he will teach you all you know to heal your Clanmates."

"Splashpaw! Splashpaw! Splashpaw!" The Clan cheered and the kit bounded toward her new mentor and eagerly touched noses with him.

Emberburn's wound started to sting and he gritted his teeth. *I should get my injuries treated before they get infected.* He stood up, grimacing at the pain as he hobbled toward the medicine cat's den. As he entered the cave, Splashpaw noticed him before her new mentor.

"Emberburn!" She meowed, her voice excited as she saw him. "Do you need your injuries treated? Can I treat them?"

Emberburn felt taken aback by her bubbly personality and felt a gentle smile creep across his lips and he looked at Shellfur. The tom was gazing gently at his apprentice and purred. "Of course, Splashpaw." He meowed. "You need the practice anyway."

Splashpaw's eyes filled with joy and she pranced around him happily. "My first patient!" She chirped.

"Alright, calm down," Shellfur meowed, his voice a purr as he watched his new apprentice. "I've told you some of the herbs before, and I'll put your memory to the test." Splashpaw straightened, casting Emberburn a gleeful look before focusing on her mentor. "What do we use to stop bleeding?" He asked.

Splashpaw replied without missing a beat. "Cobwebs!" She meowed.

"Good," Shellfur praised and nodded. "Now, what do we use for infection?"

Splashpaw screwed up her nose in thought before answering. "Horsetail and marigold," she meowed.

"Excellent!" Shellfur purred and flicked his gaze to Emberburn. "She learns quickly." He commented.

Emberburn couldn't help but smile at the small apprentice. "I can see," he agreed. "Which is great, because we may have another fight against NightClan for trespassing!"

Splashpaw's eyes widened and sat in front of the warrior, bombarding him with questions. "Are you scared of battle? What's it like? Is it true NightClan can swim? What's OakClan like?"

"Splashpaw!" Shellfur cried, sounding amused and exasperated. "You need to concentrate on your duties as a medicine cat. Go fetch some cobwebs and marigold."

Splashpaw ducked her head in embarrassment and quickly scurried off toward the medicine stores.

Emberburn chuckled and gazed warmly at Shellfur, who was looking at his wounds. "She seems very lively," he meowed. When the medicine cat nodded, he went on. "Splashpaw will be a great medicine cat." When Shellfur sniffed the scratch on his shoulder, he winced as his nose grazed the injury.

Shellfur pulled back and looked at Emberburn, his eyes sympathetic. "I overheard Hollyfire talking to Pebblestar about changing Moonkit's name to Deafkit." He meowed and Emberburn tensed. "It's a horrible name, but Hollyfire is his mother. It's her choice to name her kits whatever she wants."

"But it's cruel!" Emberburn protested. "It isn't right to name a cat, especially a kit, after something they can't control."

Shellfur blinked and sighed. "I don't like it any more than you do," he meowed in a low voice so Splashpaw didn't hear. "But it's her choice." Splashpaw bounded back toward them, herbs clamped firmly between her jaws. "Ah, perfect!"

Splashpaw set the herbs down at his paws and looked at Shellfur. "Can I treat him?" She begged. "Please, Shellfur?"

Shellfur chuckled but shook his head and Splashpaw's tail drooped. "You can take some borage to the queens and check on the kits."

Splashpaw brightened at the mention of the kits. "Okay!" She bounded toward the herb store and raced out of the den in a blur.

Shellfur called after her. "Bring back some prey from the prey-pile!" His eyes glowed with amusement and affection and he turned back to Emberburn, starting to treat his injuries.

"Train her well, Shellfur." The warrior meowed, rasping his tongue over the medicine cat's ear. Shellfur glanced up from what he was doing as the tom went on. "You might not get another cat like her to train."

Shellfur blinked, surprised, then broke into a soft purr. "I'll thank StarClan every day for blessing me with her eagerness to be my apprentice."

Chapter Five

"Emberburn!" The sound of Splashpaw's joyful voice roused him from sleep and he opened an eye sleepily. He saw the apprentice standing in front of him, her amber eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Ugh," Emberburn rolled onto his side away from Splashpaw. "Splashpaw, it isn't dawn yet." He groaned.

Splashpaw leaped over him and prodded his shoulder. "Wake up, sleepypaws." She chirped. "I need to check your wounds and rewrap them."

There was shuffling from the other side of the den and a weak, rattling voice rasped. "Let him sleep, Splashy." Whiteblaze croaked and Emberburn shot his head up, instantly awake.

Splashpaw brightened and she purred. "He's awake, Whiteblaze!" She meowed. "I'll go tell Shellfur!" In a flash, she was bounding out of the cave.

Emberburn rose stiffly to his paws and hobbled toward the sick elder. In the three days since the battle, Emberburn's wounds showed no sign of infection and he felt stronger and stronger thanks to Splashpaw's gentle, yet chatty treatment. Even though the warriors who had fought in the battle were healing, those with greencough and the few who had whitecough were getting worse. Whiteblaze was among the worst cats with greencough and she hadn't been reacting well to the herbs, including catmint.

"How are you doing today, Whiteblaze?" He meowed quietly, crouching in front of the elder. He made sure to not get too close, despite wanting to press comfortingly against her side.

Whiteblaze looked up at him without lifting her head. Her amber eyes were glazed and Emberburn fought back a wince. "I'm no better than I was yesterday," she rasped. "You worry about me for what reason? I'm bound to join StarClan anyway."

Emberburn gasped and pressed his cheek fiercely against hers. "Don't say that!" He scolded. "You'll be just fine when Shellfur gets more catmint and tansy."

"Emberburn," Whiteblaze's voice was gentle as she blinked up at him. "I'm older than your mother and father, and my body doesn't react to herbs like it used to. I'll be in StarClan before the leafbare is over."

"But the Clan needs you!" Emberburn cried, his voice shrill with anguish and despair. "What would Poppybee, Halfsnow, and Echospeck do without you? What would *I* do without you?"

Whiteblaze let out a dry laugh and closed her eyes. "You've lasted with the burden of your mother's past weighing down on your shoulders. If you can do something like that, you can live without me." Her voice trailed off and panic flared in Emberburn's chest.

"You can't die, Whiteblaze!" He meowed. "You can't!" Emberburn desperately looked around for something to ease the she-cat's suffering.

"Emberburn?" Shellfur's concerned mew snapped into his panicked state and he whirled around to see Shellfur and Splashpaw looking at him in surprise. "What's going on?"

"I-I don't know!" He meowed, his voice anxious. "But Whiteblaze isn't getting any better!"

Splashpaw hurried toward him and guided him back toward his nest. "StarClan will decide what happens to her," she meowed sympathetically. "Whether she joins them or not."

"But she can't die!" Emberburn shrieked, rearing on his hind legs and flailing his front paws. Splashpaw's eyes flashed with alarm and she nervously looked over at Shellfur, who watched in concern. "Save her!"

Shellfur let out a long sigh and padded toward him, his eyes flashing. "Emberburn, Whiteblaze cannot live forever. Whether or not you accept it is up to you, but she may walk with StarClan or

not. It isn't up to you or us." He flicked his ear to the den entrance. "Go take a walk around the camp, eat some fresh-kill, talk to your Clanmates, get a drink. Just get out of here for a while."

Reluctant to leave the dying elder, he lowered his head and headed for the cave entrance. Casting one final glance over his shoulder at Whiteblaze's nest, he sighed and padded into the clearing.

The sun had risen since Splashpaw had woken him up and he felt relieved as he saw his Clanmates out of their dens and starting to talk amongst themselves. Emberburn heard excited squeaks and turned his head to see a stampede of kits charging out of the nursery in a wave of fluff.

At the lead, Stemkit and Ravenkit were the oldest of the kits. They were the first two to teach the others how to play moss-ball and hide-and-seek. Stemkit was larger and cockier than his brother and always urged the other younger kits to break the rules and get into trouble by the queens. Ravenkit always followed Stemkit and stayed by his side with undoubted loyalty. They were three moons old and were going to be made apprentices at any day.

Emberburn watched in amusement as they led the charge toward their father, Lizardberry and saw him fall onto his side in surprise while Snowshine watched from the nursery, fondness twinkling in her eyes.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Pebblestar's call made the kits instantly alert, their ears pricked and tails lashing.

"What's going on?" Splashpaw asked as she padded up behind him and brushing her pelt against his. "The sun's barely up!"

Emberburn nudged her shoulder with his nose in amusement. "You woke me up before dawn," he teased.

Splashpaw's eyes glittered with embarrassment. "You can't sleep all day!" She retorted hotly.

"I wish," scoffed Shellfur as he strode to Emberburn's right flank and

sat down. His tail curled around his front paws and looked up at Pebblestar. "I wonder what's going on." He mused and began to wash his shoulder.

Emberburn shrugged and settled down between the two healers. "I think it's Stemkit and Ravenkit's apprentice ceremony," he suggested and yawned. "It better hurry up. I'd like to catch on the sleep I missed out on." He cast Splashpaw a teasing look before looking up at Pebblestar as he began to speak.

"Stemkit and Ravenkit have reached their third moon and are ready to become apprentices." Announced the Clan leader and puffed out his chest. "Come forward, you two." As the two kits bounded forward, he went on. "Until you have earned your warrior names, you will be known as Stempaw and Ravenpaw. Branchstripe, you are a strong and tactful warrior. I know you will be a great mentor to Ravenpaw."

Branchstripe rose to his paws and nodded, his eyes blazing with pride and excitement as he touched noses with his new apprentice. As they returned to the crowd, Pebblestar went on.

"Emberburn, you are a determined and skilled warrior and I know you will teach Stempaw all that you know." Pebblestar meowed and met Emberburn's gaze steadily.

Emberburn stared at his leader in shock as he numbly rose to his paws. He stumbled into the center of the clearing to touch noses with Stempaw.

Gazing around at the rest of the Clan, many of the warriors were giving him disapproving glances and murmurs of doubt created a buzz that rang through his ears. He blinked down at his paws and flattened his ears to his head. *They don't believe in me.* He thought miserably.

The Clan cheered for the new apprentices and Emberburn turned to his apprentice, who stared eagerly up at him. Hope flared in his chest as he realized he didn't care that he was the son of an evil cat. Just that he was his new mentor and would teach him everything he needed to know to become a warrior.

"What are we going to do first, Emberburn?" Stempaw asked, his eyes blazing with an intense fire. "Are we going to hunt? Fight? Patrol?"

Emberburn frowned and flicked his tail across his apprentice's mouth to quiet him. "Calm down," he scolded lightly and Stempaw fell silent, though he fidgeted with anticipation. "First, I need to get my wounds checked by Shellfur and Splashpaw, then, you can help around the camp."

"Why can't we go see the territory?" Stempaw complained, casting a frustrated glance at Ravenpaw as he left the camp. "I want to see the forest!"

Emberburn sighed in exasperation and shook his head. "We can do that tomorrow," he meowed. He flexed his muscles and winced as his shoulder wound began to burn like fire. "Besides, the forest isn't going anywhere."

Stempaw let out a snort of anger and lashed his tail. "But I want to start my training *now*!" He insisted.

Emberburn gave his apprentice a hard stare and lashed his tail once. "*Cut it out!*" He spat and Stempaw let out a growl. "You are just out of the nursery and have no right to treat me like your brother! You are *my* apprentice, Stempaw, and you will listen to *me*!" He bared his teeth and Stempaw shrank to the ground. "Go clean out the elders' den and then the nursery. Don't come back until you've learned some manners!" Hot with fury, he spun around and stalked toward the medicine cat den.

Splashpaw noticed his furious entrance at once by the sound of his claws scraping against the ground. "Emberburn!" She meowed, sounding surprised. "Shouldn't you be touring the territory with Stempaw?"

Emberburn let out a growl and pushed past the she-cat and flopped into his nest. "I wish he wasn't such a pushover!" He meowed, his voice bitter.

"What did he do?" Shellfur asked as he padded towards him with

herbs dangling from his jaws.

"Demanding I take him out into the territory like I'm some kind of apprentice to be bossed around!" Emberburn hissed, sinking his claws into the moss.

"What did you say?" Splashpaw asked. She unwrapped his herb poultice and started to replace it as he explained what he responded with.

Shellfur purred in amusement and looked over his shoulder at Emberburn. "You were quite the pawful when you were a 'paw." He pointed out teasingly.

Emberburn returned the medicine cat's gaze. "Only because the Clan didn't trust me!" He retorted, his pelt starting to burn. "They still don't trust me," he added bitterly.

"Pebblestar trusts you," Splashpaw pointed out. "He gave you an apprentice, after all." She sat back on her haunches and gazed proudly at her work. "You're all patched up! You shouldn't fall apart when you go into battle again." She purred.

"Thanks, Splashpaw," he meowed and flexed his shoulder, relieved that it didn't hurt as bad. He dipped his head to the two medicine cats and slipped out of the den. His earlier anger at Stempaw had evaporated and he wondered if he'd followed his orders.

"Emberburn!" Snowshine trotted up to him, her eyes glinting. Emberburn gulped as she approached. *I'm going to get it,* he thought as he recalled Snowshine being Stempaw and Ravenpaw's mother.

Taking a breath, he nervously replied. "Y-yes?" He shrank under her gaze, unsure if he should face her anger, or flee with his tail tucked between his legs.

But, Snowshine's eyes showed nothing that suspected rage or disappointment. "Fennelfur wants you to go on the evening patrol with Rosefern, Stoneblaze, Petaltail, and Berrypaw." She meowed and flicked her tail. "You look like you just saw a ghost! Are you alright?"

Emberburn let out a sigh and nodded. "Yeah, just a little dizzy." When she frowned a little, he explained. "I got up too quickly."

Snowshine smiled and nodded. "Well, don't get sick while you're on the patrol." She teased and trotted away to join Lizardberry while he ate a skinny squirrel.

Emberburn watched her go and let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He wasn't expecting her reaction, but it was better than having shredded ears.

***

"Emberburn," the tom raised his head at the sound of Stempaw's voice and he saw the apprentice with scraps of moss clinging to his pelt. The sun was lingering overhead as snowflakes drifted lazily down onto the peaceful camp. White flakes clung to his thick tortoiseshell fur and Emberburn swallowed the bite of the mouse in his mouth.

"What?" He meowed, remembering Stempaw's attitude the day before.

Stempaw's eyes flashed and Emberburn drew himself up to his full height. Mosspelt glanced between them nervously as she ate her vole. "What are we going to do today?"

Emberburn couldn't help but detect a hint of a growl in his apprentice's voice and his fur prickled with irritation. "I'm tempted to keep you in the camp for another day," he began and saw Stempaw's fur start to bristle. "But, you need to get familiar with the territory." Finishing off the last bites of his mouse, he licked his lips and got to his paws. "Come on." He meowed and headed for the gorse tunnel.

As he led his apprentice into the forest, Stempaw bounded and wove between the trees, chasing falling leaves and catching snowflakes as they fell. Emberburn couldn't help but purr in amusement as Stempaw charged through a snow mound, bursting through it and rolling onto his back, battering at the white flakes as the cascaded around him.

Stempaw let out an excited shout and looked over at Emberburn, his tail wagging like a dog's. Without warning, he hurried off, shouting and hollering.

Emberburn felt alarm spike through him and he charged after him. What if he'd run into an enemy patrol? As he skidded to a halt a few tail-lengths from his apprentice, he saw Stempaw standing still and staring at the ground. He quickly strode to his side and nudged him. "What's wrong?"

Stempaw blinked as though he was surprised to see his mentor and shakily replied. "T-there's something in the snow," he whispered. "It-it's curled in a ball."

Emberburn frowned and followed his apprentice's gaze and gaped at what he saw. A pale-furred, small shape was curled in a neat ball in a den that was dug out. Its pelt was spotted with snowflakes and Emberburn felt his heart stop. This thing was rather small for a kit, but maybe it was a runt.

"What do we do?" Stempaw looked up at him, eyes wide. "We can't leave it here!"

Emberburn gulped. How would the Clan react? What would Pebblestar do? What would *he* do? Taking a deep breath, he leaned over and grasped the creature's scruff in his jaws.

At once, its eyes flew open and it started to shriek and bark. It writhed in his jaws and Emberburn fought the urge to drop it, take Stempaw between his teeth, and flee back to the camp. Instead, he swallowed back his fear and turned his head, heading in the direction of the DawnClan camp, the thrashing creature hanging from his jaws.

When he pushed his way into the camp, every cat was aware of their arrival from the small creature screeching and barking unstoppably.

"Some cat shut that thing up!" Hissed Firestep as he flung his paws over his ears.

Gingerheart let out a snarl and tried to hide behind Mosspelt. "Get that thing away from here!" He spat. "It'll scare away all the prey!"

Pebblestar came bounding out of his den, scraps of moss clinging to his pelt as he flattened his ears to his head. "What in the name of StarClan is going on?" He asked, almost drowned out by the screaming.

"Emberburn brought back that...*thing* from the forest!" Goosewing shouted.

Shellfur and Splashpaw fumbled out of their den and gawked at the pale-furred creature. "What in the name of StarClan is that?" Shellfur hollered.

"A kit!" Stempaw answered in a shout. "We found it in the forest in a den of snow!"

"Then shut it up and explain before it deafens us!" Splashpaw yowled.

"I don't know how!" Emberburn meowed through the screeching kit's scruff. Thinking quickly, he shot towards the nursery and slid inside. The kit seemed to stop wailing and barking as they slipped inside and sniffed the air. At once, Emberburn let the kit go and watched as it shot toward Mistlesky and nuzzled against her belly and fell silent as it began to suckle. Emberburn let out a sigh and shook out his pelt. "Finally."

"What is it, Emberburn?" Mistlesky asked, glancing out of the corner of her eye at the small scrap.

"It's a kit," he replied and shook himself. "Could you nurse it for a while until Pebblestar decides what to do with it?"

"Of course," Mistlesky stretched out her head and touched her nose to the kit's head as it suckled. "It looks to be about a half-moon old."

Emberburn dipped his head. "Thank you, Mistlesky." He meowed and ducked out of the nursery.

Pebblestar and the Clan were waiting outside. Many were rubbing

their ears with their paws. "Explain, Emberburn." The leader ordered sharply.

Emberburn gulped, suddenly aware of the Clan staring at him. Catching Mosspelt's supportive gaze, he explained how he was showing Stempaw the forest and he stumbled upon the kit.

"It's very odd for a mother cat to abandon a kit that young," Fennelfur commented. Pain engulfed her gaze as she went on. "No kit deserves to die in the cold."

Pebblestar met Emberburn's gaze steadily. "Was there any sign of a mother or father nearby?" He asked.

Emberburn shook his head. "Not so much as a paw print." He reported and looked over his shoulder at the nursery. "It won't last a day out there, Pebblestar. We have to take it in." Turning his head, he looked pleadingly at his leader. "Please?"

Pebblestar was quiet for a moment before he sighed. "I don't see why we can't take it in." He meowed, his voice laced with uncertainty.

An outraged cry came from Gingerheart, who glared at Emberburn. "Are you all mad?" He spat from where he stood with Mosspelt. "That *thing* will screech until we're all as deaf as a tree! It'll be of no use for us!"

"It's just a kit," Shellfur objected. "If there's no parents or siblings, what else can we do?"

"Give it to a Twoleg!" Gingerheart snorted, as though it were obvious. "A Twoleg would turn it into a fat, lazy, slop-eating kittypet."

Emberburn wrinkled his nose in disgust at the warrior. "Be my guest and go right up to a Twoleg." He retorted and shook out his fur. "Besides, why give it up to become another enemy when we can train it to be like us?"

Gingerheart glared at Emberburn with undisguised hatred. "You think that just because you found it with Stempaw, you get to decide what happens to it!" He curled his lip in distaste and turned away with a huff. "You're no better than your mother."

Emberburn dug his claws into the ground as the warrior stalked away. Mosspelt hurried after him, but Gingerheart didn't turn around. He turned his head and snarled at the she-cat before disappearing into the warrior's den.

"It is settled, then." Pebblestar meowed and climbed his way up the Jagged Stone. Emberburn's eyes followed his every move, his muscles tense. "The kit stays with us and will be raised to become a warrior."

***

Emberburn pushed his way into the apprentice's den. Snow clung to his pelt as a fresh layer fell in thick, fat flakes that stung his ear tips and made his nose run. *More cats will get sick,* he thought dreadfully.

It had been a quarter-moon since Pebblestar announced they'd be keeping little Palekit, who still suckled at the curve of Mistlesky's belly. Despite his age, the kit hadn't grown much. His belly was rounder thanks to the queen's milk.

"Stempaw," he called. At once, a head popped up from a nest and he watched his apprentice fumble towards him, seeming asleep on his paws.

"What are we doing today?" Stempaw mumbled, his eyes glazed as though he were still sleeping.

Emberburn suppressed a purr of amusement and twitched his whiskers. "The Clan needs more prey for the fresh-kill pile," he meowed. "So we're going hunting all day."

Stempaw blinked as he registered his mentor's words. "Okay," he meowed.

Emberburn twitched his ear and spun around, heading for the gorse tunnel with Stempaw trailing behind. Pushing through the gorse, he

couldn't help but think about Palekit. The kit was so small for his age. Granted, he wasn't in the best condition when Stempaw discovered him, but Emberburn thought the scrap would fatten up and grow as his health improved.

"We can't tell Palekit anything," Shellfur had warned the Clan when Palekit's eyes had opened for the first time. "Since we do not know anything about him, we cannot tell him anything but he's going to be a great warrior."

Emberburn looked over his shoulder at Stempaw, who seemed more awake but not happy. Stempaw hadn't taken the thought of a new mouth to feed as badly as the other apprentices, but he didn't react at all when Emberburn said they'd be hunting. *It's like he doesn't want anything to do with being an apprentice.* The thought washed over Emberburn and he stiffened. *Maybe it's because he has me as his mentor.*

"You're no better than your mother." Gingerheart's words infuriated Emberburn. How dare he think he'd be anything like Nightstar! Even though he was her son, so was Mosspelt and Hollyfire, and Gingerheart didn't seem to hate them as much as Emberburn. *Probably because he's got a thing for Mosspelt.* Emberburn's face twisted into a scowl. *He'd better not treat her like he treats me!* He unsheathed his claws. *If he does, I'll claw out his eyes and feed him to the foxes!*

The scent of mouse filled his nose and he stopped, tail raised to stop Stempaw. Glancing out of the corner of his eye, Emberburn crouched down and jerked his muzzle in the direction of the trail.

Stempaw stared in confusion at his mentor before letting out a groan and stalking forward. He sloppily crouched down and followed the scent of the prey. Excitement that his apprentice would catch his first piece of prey filled him from ears to tail tip.

Stempaw waggled his haunches and sprang, paws outstretched. He let out a grunt as he hit the forest floor. The small brown mouse scrambled away, heading for Emberburn. In one swift lunge, Emberburn nipped the mouses' spine and the warm body fell limp at his paws.

"Nice recover," Stempaw meowed, his voice mild as he gazed at Emberburn's kill. "It was too fast for me."

Emberburn felt frustration burst in his chest and he couldn't help but snap at his apprentice. "If you tried, you would've caught it." His voice was laced with annoyance and Stempaw shrugged.

"You killed it," he pointed out, his voice nonchalant. "I don't see the problem."

Emberburn lashed his tail and sloppily buried the fresh-kill. Drawing himself up, he loomed over his apprentice. "You need to catch your own prey," he meowed sternly. "That's why you're an apprentice and not a kit anymore."

Stempaw shrugged. "Good thing I'm not a senior apprentice," he meowed and padded deeper into the forest.

Emberburn decided against following his completely careless apprentice. Instead, he went on a solo hunt. Hunting in the snow was awful, due to his thick fur that stuck to the snow like moss to a stone. He managed to snag two more mice and an old crow picking at the ground before the wind and snow kicked up.

Emberburn gathered his prey, the mice in his jaws and crow balancing between his shoulders, and headed back to the camp. The wind howled in his ears but gave him room to think about something other than training and patrolling. Hollyfire's kits were approaching their apprentice ceremonies and he wondered who would be their mentors. *Patchsnow hasn't gotten an apprentice yet, and she's still young. She'd be a good mentor to Whiskerkit. Adderseed is a bit older but more experienced, he would be fantastic for Russetkit and temper her boldness.* Then, fear washed over him. *Deafkit doesn't have his hearing, how can he hear prey? He would never know what our voices sound like, or the call of the birds at dawn.*

At last, he'd made it to the camp entrance and he halted, tasting the air. *It smells off over here, has Fennelfur sent out a quick hunting patrol?* However, the scent seemed different from a normal patrol and he shrugged. *Maybe I'm going crazy with the weather.*

"Hey, Emberburn!" Patchsnow padded up to him, her thin dark brown fur speckled with snow. When her yellow eyes landed on his prey, her eyes widened. "Amazing catch!" She exclaimed and gawked at the crow. "The elders will love that!" Reaching around him, she grasped the feathered bird off his shoulders.

Emberburn felt his pelt grow hot despite the wind and snow. Patchsnow's soft fur brushed against him as she pulled back, smiled at him, and bounded away towards the elder's den. A pang of sadness hit the warrior as he recalled Whiteblaze's death a few days after Palekit was accepted into the Clan. She'd fought bravely against her illness but, in the dark of night, she slipped away and joined StarClan.

After depositing his mice on the fresh-kill pile, there was a cry of alarm from the nursery and thundering paws as a cat burst from the bramble den. Leaffire's eyes shone with worry and a wild light twinkled in their light blue depths. She let out a screech and Emberburn cringed at the high-pitched sound.

Almost at once, cats flooded into the clearing to see what was going on. Some had moss clinging hungrily at their fur as though they were about to go to sleep.

"Leaffire?" Pebblestar skidded to a halt outside his den at the base of the Jagged Stone. "What's the matter?"

The queen swung her head around and she stared at each of her Clanmates before her eyes rested on her leader. "My kits!" She cried, her voice anguished and fearful. "My kits have gone!"

Chapter Six

"What?" Pebblestar bounded to the queen's side. "How did they get by you?" He asked, looking at Leaffire in confusion.

The she-cat snapped harshly at the leader. "You try dealing with two kits that want to become warriors!" She spat and scraped her claws against the ground. "I closed my eyes for one second while they were playing and now they're gone!"

Hollyfire strode to her denmates' side and rested her tail along her back comfortingly. "Don't worry, Leaffire." She soothed, her eyes soft. "The warriors will find them before you know it."

Leaffire glared at each of the warriors through narrowed eyes. "Then get on with it!" She snapped. "Get my kits!"

Guilt washed over Emberburn as he thought about the strange scent he'd smelled as he returned from his hunt. *It was the kits!* He mentally cuffed himself over the ears. *They snuck out of camp!* Suddenly, his blood ran cold. *I didn't see Stempaw in the camp when I returned. Oh, StarClan, don't let him be out in a snowstorm!*

Fennelfur's voice snapped him back to the present. "I want Petaltail, Stoneblaze, and Mosspelt to scour the NightClan side of the territory." She ordered, her tail flicking behind her. "Gingerheart, you can lead Adderseed, Bumblepaw, and Firestep along the OakClan side." Her eyes scanned the warriors and said. "Branchstripe, take Lizardberry, Patchsnow, and Coppersight along the lakeshore. Don't come back until your frozen, or have the kits."

Emberburn watched as the cats Fennelfur sent out hastily left the camp. His paws itched, wanting to go search for Mistkit and Boulderkit with his Clanmates.

"Emberburn?" Rosefern's voice made him turn as she looked at him gently. "Hollyfire wants to talk to you in the nursery." She meowed, her eyes glowed with sympathy and she briefly licked his cheek

before disappearing before he could react.

Emberburn sighed and trudged toward the large den, his tail dragging in the snow behind him. His ears pressed shamefully against his head as he shouldered his way into the nursery. "You wanted to talk to me, Hollyfire?" He mumbled without looking up.

He heard Hollyfire shuffling in her nest and he scuffed his paws nervously. "Come here, you feather-brain." She teased and Emberburn looked up. Hollyfire flicked her tail, gesturing with her paw for him to come closer. When he obeyed, she spoke. "I know you and Gingerheart are not on the best terms." She began, but Emberburn cut her off.

"He hates me to the core, Hollyfire," he pointed out, his voice curt.

Hollyfire flicked her tail across his mouth and huffed in annoyance. "Just let me finish," she groaned. "I know you and Gingerheart are not on the best terms," she began again. "But he and Mosspelt have gotten increasingly closer and closer over the past moons." Emberburn silently scoffed to himself and he sat down impatiently for her to finish. "She wanted me to tell you that they're mates now."

Emberburn stumbled and stared in shock at his sister. *Mosspelt and the cat who would claw my fur if he was able to are mates?* His head spun and he couldn't find the words to say in response.

Hollyfire let out a brief purr and curled her tail around her sleeping kits. "Close your mouth before you catch a fly, Emberburn." She laughed and Emberburn struggled to keep his thoughts straight. "They recently starting saying they were mates, but Mosspelt didn't want to tell you unless you shredded Gingerheart's ears."

Emberburn stared blankly at his tortoiseshell sister, his head doing laps around the lake. *What is Gingerheart playing at? He'd better not hurt her! If he does, he'll regret it!*

"Emberburn," Hollyfire meowed, her voice amused. When he blinked back into reality, she went on. "They're thinking about having kits soon."

"What?" He blurted. His tail bushed out two twice its size as he gawked at Hollyfire, shock filling him. "But they're both so young! You *just* said that they just started calling each other mates!"

Hollyfire twitched her whiskers at him and flicked her tail across his mouth once more. "Just because they're young, doesn't mean they can't think about their family." She meowed, sounding cross. Emberburn's pelt prickled and he remembered how she'd never named the father of Russetkit, Whiskerkit, and Deafkit. *Maybe she doesn't want any cat to know because of something he did.* Seeing his expression, she twitched her tail. "What's on your mind now?"

Emberburn met her gaze steadily and hesitated. How would she react if he asked who her kits' father was? Would she tear his pelt off, or claw his ears? Taking a breath, he spoke. "You never told the Clan who the father of Russetkit, Whiskerkit, and Deafkit is." He began uncertainly. At once, her eyes became guarded and she flicked her tail around her sleeping kits. His chest tightened but he forced himself to continue. "Who is their father, Hollyfire?"

Hollyfire unsheathed her claws and curled them around the moss nest. She gazed at him with an unreadable gleam in her green eyes. She closed her eyes and Emberburn waited for a few heartbeats before she opened them again. "I think the search parties are back," she meowed, her voice icy cold.

Emberburn's tail drooped as he realized she was discreetly telling him to leave. Lowering his head, he turned around and sulked out of the nursery. His ears burned with embarrassment and he let out a sigh as he padded into the clearing. *I shouldn't have said anything about that,* he raised his head as Gingerheart's patrol pushed their way into the camp.

Swinging in Gingerheart's mouth was Mistkit. The kit's fur was covered in snow and a small mouse dangled from her jaws. In Adderseed's jaws, Boulderkit was hanging limply from his scruff. Only the puff of breath from the kit told Emberburn he was still alive.

Gingerheart bent over and set Mistkit on the ground at his paws. "Fetch Shellfur!" He ordered Bumblepaw and met Emberburn's gaze

as the apprentice scurried off.

Firestep raced by him and dived into the nursery, returning shortly with a frantic Leaffire.

"My kits!" She cried, hurling herself across the clearing to the patrol. "You found them!" Leaffire lapped at Mistkit's snow-covered pale tabby fur and pulled Boulderkit towards her with a paw.

Pebblestar came rushing out of his den with Fennelfur on his tail. Shellfur was emerging from the medicine cat cave with Splashpaw. "Where were they?" The leader demanded as he stopped, gazing at the two kits as their mother licked them.

"They were by the OakClan border," Adderseed reported, shaking the snow from his fur. "They claimed they were hunting."

Mistkit's feeble voice made Emberburn flinch. "W-we only wanted to help!" She rasped, her voice weak and strained.

Leaffire rasped her tongue over her daughter's head. "It's okay," she whispered, curling herself around her kits and wrapping her tail around them. "You're safe now. And I'll never let out of my sight again."

Emberburn examined the mouse Mistkit had dropped when Gingerheart put her on the ground. It was fairly small, but bigger than the kit. It had teeth marks around its neck and claw marks on its hind-quarters. "They made an effort to catch this," he pointed out, lifting his head to look at Pebblestar. Pushing the killed prey towards his leader, he went on. "They only wanted to help the Clan."

Gingerheart scoffed. "They could have been killed!" He snapped, glaring at Emberburn. "Would that help the Clan?"

Emberburn ignored the warrior's words and looked down at Boulderkit and Mistkit. They were two-and-a-half-moons old and would be made apprentices in a half-moon. "They caught prey for us, and they proved themselves able to hunt without practice."

Shellfur pushed his way into the crowd and nosed Leaffire's tail off

the kits to get a closer look. "They look healthy and in one piece," he said, raising his head. "They're cold but they'll be fine."

Pebblestar nodded and looked down at the two kits, who were starting to shake from the cold. "Take them into the nursery and warm them up," he meowed gently to Leaffire. "I'll have a cat bring you some prey for your milk."

Leaffire didn't need to be told twice as she nosed her kits to their paws and guided them toward the nursery. When they disappeared inside, Gingerheart spoke again.

"They need to be punished," he growled. "They left the camp without permission or telling any cat. They should know better."

"They're only kits," Emberburn objected, earning a scowl from the bright ginger tabby warrior. "They're eager to become apprentices, why not let them off just this once?" He glanced at Pebblestar, who looked thoughtful. "After all, Mistkit and Boulderkit knew how to catch a mouse."

"You can't be serious," Gingerheart's tail lashed back and forth in anger. "What comes next? Sending kits on patrols and making them hunt for us?" He glared at Emberburn and Pebblestar. "You're fox-hearted if you think we'd put up with that." Without another word, the tom spun around and stalked away.

Pebblestar sighed and shook his head. "Gingerheart makes a good point, Emberburn." He meowed, looking at the tortoiseshell tom sympathetically. "But, I believe that since they caught prey, they won't be punished."

Emberburn let out a relieved sigh and dipped his head respectfully to his Clan leader. "Thank you, Pebblestar." He breathed.

Pebblestar's eyes twinkled in amusement. "It was your idea, Emberburn." He meowed and turned around, heading for his den.

Emberburn's chest swelled with pride at his leader's words. Turning, he padded confidently towards the warrior's den. As he reached the entrance, movement caught his eye and he saw Stempaw entering

the camp with a squirrel and mouse dangling from his jaws. His apprentice didn't seem to notice him as he dropped off his prey at the prey-pile and slid into the apprentice's den. *So he was hunting,* Emberburn thought, a smile creeping across his face. *He hunts well.* Turning back to the den entrance, he slipped in.

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Pebblestar's yowl roused Emberburn from his peaceful sleep. He opened his eyes, surprised to see the sun had started to set and the cold snow was laying in front of the entrance.

Hastily, he pushed himself to his paws and bounded out of the den. "What does Pebblestar want?" He asked as Firestep padded beside him.

The tabby warrior shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he meowed and looked up at Pebblestar, his dark green eyes gleaming. "But I hope it's something worthwhile."

Emberburn couldn't help but agree with the mackerel tabby tom. After all, what was so important that the Clan had to be woken up before the sun fully set? *Maybe it's Mistkit and Boulderkit's naming ceremony.* Then, he mentally scolded himself. *They're a half-moon too young.*

"Cats of DawnClan," Pebblestar began with a swish of his tabby tail. "I have thought long and hard about this, and discussed this with my senior warriors."

"Get on with it!" Echospeck called, clearly irritated. "No use spending all night out here!"

Pebblestar twitched his ear at the elder and went on. "I've decided to expand our territory as far as the hills that stretch behind us." He mewed, his voice confident and strong. "With our Clan growing so quickly, we need more prey to feed our hungry kits."

"DawnClan has never gone there before!" Called Rosefern from

where she sat with Petaltail. "It could be dangerous!"

"Think of all the prey that could be there," Goosewing pointed out with a flick of his fluffy speckled tail. "We could eat more during leafbare."

Adderseed's voice rose above the other cats. "What about the Twolegs that reside there?" He asked, his voice wary. "There *might* be more prey, there *might* be more herbs, but what truly lies beyond our southern borders?"

Pebblestar blinked at the dark gray tabby tom in acknowledgment. "I understand your concerns, but what if NightClan or OakClan steal the territory before us? We must take advantage of what is available to us right now."

"Let's say we go there right now," Emberburn interjected. "What if we find nothing? What would we do if there are dogs and Twolegs living there already?"

"Then we won't take it," Pebblestar answered simply. "It's worth a shot. Besides, would you say no to more fresh-kill?"

"If it risks the safety of my Clanmates," Rosefern lashed her tail. "Then, of course, I would say no."

Fennelfur raised her voice. "Pebblestar and I have agreed to give this a try," she meowed. "If it proves useful to us, then we'll take it before any other cat gets their paws on it."

Pebblestar nodded to his deputy and flicked his tail. "I want Gingerheart, Emberburn, Firestep, Rosefern, Petaltail, and Goosewing to head out and see what's over there." He ordered. "If you face trouble, come back at once and report. Gingerheart, you will lead the patrol."

The bright tabby nodded and rose to his paws, gathering the chosen cats with a whisk of his tail. Emberburn hesitated, reluctant to go into unfamiliar territory, especially with a cat he didn't trust. Sighing, he followed with his tail dragging behind him. *If Mosspelt and Gingerheart are mates,* he thought glumly, *then I'll need to talk*

with Gingerheart at some point.

Petaltail fell into step beside him and shivered. "Why can't we do this in the morning?" She grumbled. "What's Pebblestar thinking, getting territory that we're unfamiliar with?" She glanced at Emberburn out of the corner of her eye. "It's too cold to be doing this now."

Emberburn chose not to reply and just followed his Clanmates. He had to concentrate on not falling asleep on his paws as Gingerheart led the way to the NightClan border, turned to the right, and headed for the backlands of the DawnClan territory.

As they padded on, Gingerheart raised his tail and signaled for his patrol to stop. Emberburn padded to the tom's side and looked at him, confused. Gingerheart's nose was twitching and Emberburn watched him taste the air. "Do you smell that?" The tabby tom murmured.

Emberburn frowned and gave the air a long sniff before stiffening his shoulders. "Smells like foxes," he meowed. His claws unsheathed and he scanned the fog-covered forest for the black-footed brutes.

Rosefern padded toward a rancid-smelling pile of dung and scrunched up her nose. "They've been here recently," she growled. Turning her head, she looked at Emberburn and Gingerheart. "I'd say before dusk at the earliest."

Emberburn's ear flicked as he heard rustling not far away from their location and sniffed the air. The fur along his spine stood on end as he hissed a warning. "They're here!"

There was a bark, a thunder of paws, then two large foxes burst from the treeline and hurled themselves at the patrol. Emberburn's pelt fluffed out in fear and darted to the side with a yowl. Teeth sank into his tail and, with a growl, the largest fox yanked him to the side and shook him like a squirrel before tossing him to the side.

Emberburn groaned as he hit the ground but scrambled to his paws, dazed. Shaking his head to clear it, he spotted Rosefern writing

underneath the fox, its massive paw pressing down on her chest. With a battle cry, Emberburn charged at the fox. He swiped at its ears then aimed for its eyes.

Firestep leaped onto the fox's back and clung onto its fur with his claws. He slashed its ears until it reared, knocking him off its back with a *thump* as he landed on the ground.

Petaltail yowled and Emberburn sprang again as Rosefern scrambled back with a pained hiss. Together, they raced in circles around the fox, clawing at its sides and nipping its hind legs.

"Keep it distracted!" Gingerheart called as he leaped back to avoid the snapping jaws of the vixen. His left ear was torn and bleeding heavily but his eyes were as bright as ever.

"Easier said than done!" Emberburn dove under the dog fox and clawed at its underbelly before sliding out the other side. Emberburn leaped to his paws and slashed the fox's muzzle before retreating back against a tree. "We're never going to get rid of them if we're torn to shreds!"

Gingerheart gasped as the vixen's claws raked his shoulder and rushed away as Firestep took his place. The bright tabby tom hurried to join Emberburn and panted, looking at Emberburn. "What do we do?" He hissed, pain lacing each word. "We can't drive them both away."

"You're the patrol leader," Emberburn snapped back, pain lapping at his strength. "You decide what we do." Turning his head, he let out a gasp as Rosefern was held up by her throat in the dog fox's jaws and shaken. "Rosefern!" He shouted and raced to her aid, Gingerheart on his heels, yowling.

Rosefern opened her mouth to cry in pain but only choked, blood trickling down her nose and escaping his mouth. Emberburn's eyes widened in fear as the senior warrior desperately clawed at the fox's muzzle, only to be thrown across the clearing and skidding into the grass. She didn't move.

"Rosefern!" Emberburn screeched, rushing over to her and towering

over her limp form. Horror filled him as he nudged her, only for her to groan. *She's alive!* He nosed her onto her side and gaped at her. Her entire face was sticky and covered in blood, oozing onto the ground and painting the grass scarlet. Her breathing was ragged and shallow, the only sign of her alive was the tell-tale throb of life beneath her skin. "Don't worry, Rosefern," he whispered, panicking. "I'll get you back to camp and shred that fox."

"Emberburn!" He whipped around at the call and bit back a wail as he saw Goosewing laying on his side, his yellow eyes dull and gazing sightlessly up at the sky. The world spun as he held back fury and grief. One of his Clanmates was dead, the other scarcely breathing. "Emberburn, help!" Gingerheart's voice dulled as anger consumed him and he flung himself head-on at the fox, roaring like a lion with his claws extended.

Chapter Seven

Emberburn opened his eyes and found himself in a dark, fog-covered forest. He rose to his paws warily, suddenly aware of how vulnerable he was out in the open. *This is weird,* he thought, looking around in confusion. *I don't remember falling asleep.* Looking at his fur, he realized he wasn't injured. No blood stained his pelt and no wounds made him grit his teeth. "Where am I?" He called out, scanning the endless rows of dead trees and bushes.

"The Dark Forest," replied a calm, rattling voice. Emberburn nearly leaped out of his skin as he recognized the voice. His eyes narrowed into slits as a shape slid from the shadows. Blood slid off her black fur, staining the ground dark red. Her paws crackled against the dead grass as she neared. Her amber eyes glowed like stars in the black sky of Silverpelt. "Welcome, Emberburn."

"Nightstar," he spat her name like bile. The bitterness of his mother's treachery came in harsh waves, lapping at his belly before filling him. There was a tenderness in her amber gaze, and it made him falter. "Nightstar." This time, there was no scorn or contempt in his voice. Only a small sliver of relief and overwhelming grief crept into his mew as he watched his mother weave towards him.

"Emberburn," Nightstar purred. It soothed him, oddly enough. His legs began to shake and he trembled as she got closer. This was his mother. Alive and breathing. *But how? She's dead.* He started to feel dizzy and he staggered. The dark leader lunged forward and instead of going for a killing bite to his throat, she supported his weight on her shoulder and guided him like a kit to a short dead tree. "Easy, little warrior," she meowed, her voice soft like a cloud. "Don't crush me."

Emberburn was astonished by how much muscle rippled underneath her thin, scarred black pelt. *How many nights has she spent growing stronger? There's no prey down here. At least, none that I can scent.* Leaning against the dead oak, he stared at his mother, baffled. Her features were just as he remembered when she'd died

no more than four moons prior. The scar on her lips quirked up as she smirked and he felt his heart crack. *You could've lived!* He wanted to yowl. *You could've been a better leader!*

Nightstar sat beside him, her ears only reaching his shoulder as she stared silently ahead, seeming lost in her thoughts. Emberburn gawked at how small she was. *Was she that small when we attacked her?* A pit of anger formed in his belly but he buried it. *How could I not notice? She's not even a full-grown warrior and yet she died. Now, she'll never grow.* "Stop looking at me like that," she meowed, her voice crackling with emotion. "Haven't you ever seen a smaller warrior?"

"Not one like you," Emberburn whispered, still in shock. He could feel her fur brushing against his, ever so lightly that it was almost not there. "Why?" He murmured, catching her attention. "Why are you so small?"

Nightstar let out a hearty laugh. Emberburn blinked, surprised. "I was made a warrior before I reached six moons old." She explained. "My mentor made me kill a kittypet in order to earn my name."

Emberburn stared at his mother. "What was it?" He asked. When she looked at him in confusion, he quickly added. "Your warrior name. What was it?"

Nightstar's eyes clouded with memory and Emberburn let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding in. "Nightshrike," she breathed and let out a dry laugh. Shaking her head, she added. "StarClan knows why Applestar named me that." Tilting her head back, she gazed into his eyes. "How are you, Emberburn? You look like you just saw a ghost."

Emberburn blinked down at her for a few moments before recovering. "I-I'm just in shock, that's all." He mumbled, staring at his paws in embarrassment.

"Shocked that I'm here or that you're talking to me?" Nightstar mused.

"Both," he answered honestly. "I thought I'd never get to see you

again." Nightstar chuckled and he looked at her. "I'm being honest! It's just, I never thought I'd be talking to you one-on-one like this."

Nightstar flicked her tail against his shoulder and he tensed. "I know," she soothed. "I believe you. How's life in DawnClan? How are your sisters?"

Joy filled Emberburn as he told her about Hollyfire's kits, Mosspelt finding a mate in Gingerheart, and him getting an apprentice. As he spoke, he saw pride gleaming in her amber eyes and it made him feel warm all over. *She looks so proud of us.*

"That's amazing," she purred once he'd finished. "What about my old friends?" Emberburn tilted his head at his mother. "Echospeck, Poppybee, and Whiteblaze?"

Grief stabbed his heart and he looked away. "Whiteblaze has joined StarClan," he whispered and Nightstar's breath hitched. "Greencough weakened her until she died."

"Great StarClan," Nightstar murmured and pressed against him. This time, he didn't tense. "She was always a fighter." Emberburn hesitantly flicked his tail around her and rested his chin on her head and let out a sigh. "I never believed what I had done would reflect so poorly on you guys." Nightstar whispered, her voice cracking sadly. "I thought I was being a great leader and doing what StarClan wanted. But now I'm here," she gestured with a paw to the dead trees around them. "And I can't go anywhere else."

Emberburn rasped his tongue over his mother's head, feeling her relax against him. "Don't worry," he murmured in her tattered ear. "I promise to help you in any possible way." He drew away and looked into her amber eyes. "But first, tell me about my father."

As Nightstar told him stories about Thorntail and how much they loved each other, Emberburn felt at ease with being an orphan. It wasn't uncommon for warriors to have lost their parents, as most of the Clan's warriors had none of their parents with them, but he was glad he came here and spoke to Nightstar. When Emberburn was about to speak, a wave of agony washed over him and he let out a pained cry before kneeling over, panting. Nightstar looked at him in

alarm and concern and, bending down, tucked her head under his chin and pushed him up. "What's wrong?" His mother asked, her amber eyes reflecting the worries of a mother whose kit just got a thorn stuck in their paw.

"I-I don't know," Emberburn's voice shook as he started to tremble. He looked at Nightstar, fear coursing through him. "Wh-what's happening to me?" He whimpered, feeling like a kit.

Nightstar lapped at his head with her tongue, trying to soothe him. "I think you're waking up," she mewed, her voice giving way to pain and longing. Pulling away from him, she stared at him with pride. "I'm so proud of you and your littermates, Emberburn. Don't forget that." She pressed her muzzle to his and sighed. "I love you, my little warrior."

Emberburn felt panic wash over him and he breathed in her scent before wrapping his paws around her. "Come with me!" He pleaded, staring into her eyes. "Please! You can see the Clan and Hollyfire's kits! You can start over!"

"Emberburn," Nightstar put a gentle paw to his mouth and sadly shook her head. "I cannot go back. But know that I will always walk alongside you and your sisters. Make me proud, Emberburn. I love you, and I always have." She touched her nose to his forehead and suddenly, Emberburn's eyes flew open.

"Nightstar!" He gasped, panting as he looked around. His heart raced in circles in his chest as he adjusted to his surroundings. Nightstar had gone and he was in Shellfur's den. Steadying his breathing, Emberburn pushed himself to his paws, only to let out a cry of pain and fall onto his belly.

At once, a head from the medicine cat nests popped up and a small whisper came from the nest. "Emberburn?" It was Splashpaw and silently hopped out of her nest and picked her way towards him. "Are you alright?"

Emberburn panted, his thoughts clouded with his mother's face as his sleep ebbed away. He had been there with her, in the Dark Forest. He talked to her face-to-face.

"Emberburn, are you alright?" Splashpaw's voice cut into his voice and he looked up at her with wide eyes. Her amber eyes searched his for a moment before she darted away and came back with a tangy-smelling bundle of small leaves. "Here, eat this." She put the small leaves at his paws and nosed them closer to him. "It's thyme, it'll help you with your shock."

Emberburn lapped them up without hearing half of what the medicine cat apprentice was saying. *I saw my mother, I felt her next to me.* Excitement fizzled in his belly and he wanted to spring to his paws and race to his sisters to tell them. Then, doubt washed over him and he dropped his ears. *They'd only scold me for talking with her.*

"Splashpaw," Shellfur's slurred voice made Emberburn jump in his nest before flattening his fur. "What's going on?"

"Emberburn woke up, Shellfur," Splashpaw replied and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "I gave him some thyme; he seems still in shock."

Emberburn stared ahead at the den wall as Shellfur shifted in his nest and padded over. His thought crowded his mind as the medicine cat spoke to his apprentice.

"Emberburn," Shellfur's gentle voice snapped him from his thoughts and he looked up at the medicine cat. Splashpaw was looking fearfully at him while Shellfur looked at him calmly. "How are you feeling?"

Emberburn opened his mouth to reply when pain exploded in his neck and he let out a silent shriek of agony and pawed at his throat. *I'm going to die!* He thought and blinked up at the tom.

"Splashpaw, get more cobwebs and marigold," Shellfur ordered over his shoulder as the she-cat headed outside the den. In a flash, Shellfur was redressing his neck wound and Emberburn had to grit his teeth against the pain.

"Will he be okay?" Splashpaw fretted, gazing down at him with fear in her amber eyes.

Shellfur nodded and sat back on his haunches. "Do you remember anything from the attack with the foxes?" He asked, his voice even and soothing. Emberburn shook his head and the tom sighed. "When Rosefern was attacked, you went nose-to-nose with the fox and got seriously injured." Emberburn's eyes widened as he went on. "Your throat is badly wounded and you'll have plenty of scars to show the Clan."

"Rosefern," he rasped and searing pain flashed through his neck. "How is she?"

Shellfur looked at Splashpaw and blinked at her. Nodding as though she understood, she headed out of the den and leaving the two alone. "Rosefern's face is horribly scarred. She's lucky to be alive right now." He answered, casting the nest beside Emberburn a relieved glance.

"A-and Goosewing?" Emberburn croaked, picturing the tom's body in his mind.

Shellfur's eyes darkened and he replied in a whisper. "He died before you got to camp," his shoulders drooped and he sighed. "The Clan sat vigil for him three sunrises ago."

Emberburn flattened his ears to his head and stared at his paws. Paws hitting the stone floor made his right ear twitch painfully as Splashpaw's scent washed over him. He could smell water and he looked up quickly, only to wince as pain shot through his body.

Shellfur thanked his apprentice for the wet moss and set it by Emberburn's muzzle. "Drink," he meowed. "It'll help with your speaking." Emberburn didn't need to be told twice. He lapped eagerly at the moss, satisfied as the cold water soothed some of the ache in his throat and heart. *This is delicious!* He thought as he drank.

When he pulled his head away, he looked up at the medicine cats. "How long will I be in here?" He croaked, his voice stronger but still full of pain.

Shellfur shrugged. "Depends on how well your wounds heal," he flicked his tail. "Get some more rest and I'll check on you later." Touching noses to Emberburn then Splashpaw, Shellfur padded out of the den, his tail flicking behind him.

***

"And then, I leaped up and snatched it out of the air!" Stempaw finished, sitting down with his tail flicking in excitement. Emberburn let out a rattling purr of approval as his apprentice finished his story.

In the half-moon since the fox attack, Emberburn was getting slowly better and better. He wasn't able to leave the camp and train his apprentice, but he was allowed to walk around camp every so often. At the end of each day, Stempaw would find his mentor and talk all about his day.

Since the attack, Stempaw's training had been taken over by Patchsnow. She was a wonderful mentor, according to Stempaw, and taught him everything about fighting and hunting. A pang of envy hit the tom every time his apprentice boasted about his temporary mentor, but he always shoved it away.

"Very good," Emberburn purred and flicked Stempaw's shoulder with his tail. "What about Ravenpaw?" Stempaw and his brother were supposed to battle train together, as scheduled by Patchsnow and Branchstripe. "How was your spar?"

Stempaw's eyes lit up and he went on about how he pushed Ravenpaw onto the ground. "It was amazing!" The tom meowed and looked at Emberburn, his eyes bright. "When can you leave the camp? I want to show you how I beat him!"

Emberburn smiled at his apprentice before casting a look over his shoulder where Splashpaw and Shellfur were getting a thorn out of Mistpaw's pad. He was glad that the new apprentices' previous actions hadn't landed them unable to become apprentices. Boulderpaw's mentor was Stoneblaze and Firestep got Mistpaw. "I'm not entirely sure," he admitted. "But I hope it's soon. I'm sick of being in here."

"Then you'd better get fully healed," purred Patchsnow as she padded into the cave. Her eyes sparkled gently as she gazed at him and Emberburn's heart skipped a beat. "Stempaw is a great apprentice and I'm happy to train him."

"I cannot thank you enough for taking over his training while I'm in here." Emberburn dipped his head to the warrior and looked at Stempaw, who stuck out his tongue. "What?"

Stempaw scrunched up his nose. "Your flirting is gross," he complained.

Patchsnow scoffed playfully and cuffed his ear with a gentle forepaw. "We're just Clanmates, you mousebrain." She scolded, though her voice was shaky.

Emberburn felt something grow inside his chest at her words. It didn't feel normal and he struggled to push it away. "Y-yeah," he added, his tone hurt. Looking at Stempaw, he blinked. "Why don't you catch up with Ravenpaw?" He suggested, tail flicking. "I heard Stoneblaze is taking him and Boulderpaw out hunting."

Stempaw rolled his eyes, pushed himself to his paws, and headed for the den entrance. He paused at the mouth of the cave and looked over his shoulder, eyes flicking between his mentor and Patchsnow before disappearing into the clearing.

Patchsnow looked at where he'd gone for a heartbeat longer before breaking into a small purr. "That apprentice has fluff in his brain."

Emberburn felt his heart thump in his chest as she looked over at him, her yellow eyes as soft as feathers. "Y-yes," he stuttered, trying to regain his composure. "Indeed he does."

Patchsnow approached the warrior and crouched down in front of him. Her breath hit his muzzle and he did his best not to flinch away from the warm puff of air. "I wanted to speak with you alone," she meowed, her voice quiet.

"About what?" He whispered back. His heart did laps in his chest as he peered into Patchsnow's eyes. Emberburn saw her hesitate before

speaking.

"It's Rosefern," he tensed and nodded stiffly for her to go on. "Since the fox attack, she's recovered but hasn't seen her reflection of how she looks." Patchsnow shifted her weight on her paws and went on. "She-she asked Pebblestar to change her name to better suit her injuries. To remember Goosewing's death."

Emberburn felt his chest tighten with grief as he breathed out in a small voice. "What was the name she asked for?" He didn't want to know the answer, but he badly wanted to know for his curiosity's sake.

"Tornface," Patchsnow murmured and Emberburn let out a gasp of shock and horror.

"What?!" He yelped, only to be shushed by Patchsnow.

"Keep it down," she hissed, looking over at the two medicine cats and Mistpaw as they looked over at them in concern. Patchsnow looked back at Emberburn, her eyes dark. "I don't like it either, but this is her decision. No cat blames her for Goosewing's death, but she blames herself. Sadly, no cat can sway her from her choice."

Emberburn felt agony rip through him from the inside out. This wasn't the pain he felt in his throat whenever he moved sharply, no. This was grief and a fierce sorrow for the senior warrior. *Pebblestar shouldn't have sent us on that patrol.* "Pebblestar sent Goosewing to his death," he growled, his eyes narrowing. Patchsnow's eyes widened as he went on bitterly. "He caused Rosefern's injuries and her guilt. He shouldn't have sent us there!"

Patchsnow touched her nose to his and sighed. "I know," she murmured. "But the ceremony is tonight. I know it'll be hard for every cat to get used to it, but we have to. For her sake and Goosewing's sake."

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!"

Emberburn felt Stempaw stiffen next to him as Pebblestar's voice echoed throughout the camp. The dread in his voice made Emberburn's voice run cold through his veins. *He's really going through with this.* Bitterness rolled off every hair on his tortoiseshell pelt as he rose to his paws and carried his mouse in his jaws toward the Jagged Stone.

"Cats of OakClan," Pebblestar began and Emberburn's eyes narrowed as he saw the pain in the leader's eyes. "I have some news but I shall not share it. Rosefern," he rested his gaze on the scarred senior warrior. "Please explain your decision."

Rosefern rose unsteadily to her paws and stumbled forward. Her half-scarred face, mostly scarred chest, and scarred paws making it hard for her to move steadily. As she clambered up the Jagged Stone with the aid of Fennelfur and Pebblestar. Her horribly torn-up throat looked very painful and Emberburn winced.

"Clanmates," she meowed, her voice raspy and rattled. Emberburn flattened his ears to his head. "I've thought long and hard about this and-" she broke off to cough and she struggled for breath as she attempted to go on. "B-but with Goosewing's death, I now feel my age creeping up on me. I-I wish to no longer go by the name of Rosefern, but by Tornface. To remember that Goosewing died because I wasn't able to help him in time." She lowered her ears and looked at her scarred paws.

Pebblestar touched his nose to her cheek and nodded to Fennelfur as the battle-scarred she-cat fumbled her way down back to the crowd. "I respect Rosefern's wishes and will fulfill her choice." Looking up at the sky, he said aloud. "Spirits of StarClan, you know every cat by name. I ask you now to take away the name from the cat you see before you, for it no longer stands for what she is." Resting his gaze on Rosefern as she settled back down, he went on, his voice gentle. "By my authority as Clan leader, and with the approval of our warrior ancestors, I give this cat a new name. From this moment on, she will be known as Tornface, for the guilt she carries for the death of her Clanmate."

Silence hung in the air as Tornface's new name echoed through the camp. Emberburn saw her head droop to stare at her paws and he

pushed through his sadness to chant.

"Tornface!" He yowled, challenging his Clanmates to join in with a glare of scorn.

As the Clan joined in, Tornface looked around to look at him, a mixture of relief and gratefulness in her pale blue eye before she was swept away into the warrior's den.

Chapter Eight

Emberburn unsheathed his claws as he neared the mouse, sinking them into the ground and prepared to spring. Licking his lips and bracing his haunches to pounce, he thought of the mouse's warm body lying limp at his paws.

Suddenly, a flash of fur distracted him as dark brown and white flew in front of him and landed on the mouse, killing it with a bite to the neck. Patchsnow purred with pride as she picked up the mouse, not realizing Emberburn's position.

"Good catch," he purred and rose up, startling Patchsnow as she dropped her prey. She stared at him as he padded towards her, eyes gentle. "I hesitated too much."

Patchsnow flattened her ears to her head and looked embarrassed. Her cheeks flushed and Emberburn found himself staring a bit too long and hastily looked away. "I-I didn't know you were stalking it," she looked at him. "I'm sorry."

Emberburn shrugged and flicked his tail. "At least it was caught," he pointed out. "With leafbare in full swing, we need all the prey we can get." It was true; leafbare seemed to tell every mouse, squirrel, and bird to hide and leave the Clan to starve.

Patchsnow nodded half-heartedly. "I should've let you catch it," she meowed and stretched out her muzzle to touch her nose to his. "Next time, you catch it."

Emberburn froze as his heart pounded in his chest so much, he couldn't breathe. *Get a hold of yourself, Emberburn!* His mind screamed as he stared into Patchsnow's eyes, unable to move. *She's your Clanmate!* "S-sure," he meowed.

Patchsnow let out a purr and turned away, saving Emberburn the embarrassment of seeing his flushed cheeks. "Want to keep hunting, Ember?" She asked over her shoulder as she picked up her mouse.

Emberburn stared at her physique, somehow unable to look away. Her shoulders were small but strong, adding to her soft but ferocious appearance. Her muscles rippled under her dark brown and white pelt. Her fluffy tail twitched back and forth as she waited patiently for a response. Realizing he could speak, he mumbled. "No, we should head back to camp. Tornface and the other elders would want something fresh to eat."

Since her naming ceremony, Tornface had joined the elder's den and made her self comfortable in the den. Poppybee, Echospeck, and Halfsnow welcomed her warmly and sent away any cat who looked at her wrong.

Patchsnow flicked her tail as she headed for a snow bank and pushed the white powder away with a paw. Underneath the blanket lay a scrawny squirrel and picked it up.

Emberburn watched her carry her bounty back to him with a sliver of pride. He felt impressed that she caught better than him, but wasn't surprised as she was one of the best hunters in the Clan. After he gathered the three other mice he'd managed to scramble, they headed toward the camp, fur brushing.

Slipping through the gorse, Emberburn led the way to the prey-pile and dropped his small catch next to an old crow and a small vole. Patchsnow added her prey to the growing heap and looked up at him, her cheeks still flushed. Hesitantly, she reached up and licked his cheek before briefly nuzzling him. Spinning around, she hurried across the camp to Snowshine.

Emberburn blinked as he watched her go, his heart beating in his chest. His throat burned as though he'd ran around the territory three times. Blinking, he turned and saw Stempaw watching him with amusement in his eyes. He stumbled toward his apprentice and heard the young tom snickering. "What?" He meowed, still stunned from Patchsnow's actions.

"Patchsnow likes you," Stempaw sneered, his voice tainted with amusement.

Emberburn stared at his apprentice. "Of course she doesn't!" He

protested, trying to control his beating heart. "She's just a Clanmate."

The apprentice's den entrance rustled as Ravenpaw slid to his brother's side. "It's obvious, Emberburn." He meowed, licking a paw and washing his ears. "You're just too blind to notice it."

Stempaw nudged his shoulder with his nose and Emberburn blinked at him in surprise. "Don't worry," he purred. "You'll see it someday when you're older."

"At least he knows how to keep his jaws shut," meowed a voice behind Emberburn. The two apprentices jumped and Emberburn turned his head to see Branchstripe padding toward him. The tom nodded to Emberburn and looked at his apprentice. "Did you clean the moss from your nest?"

Ravenpaw nodded and leaped to his paws, eyes sparkling. "Are we going to battle train now?" He asked, tail flicking excitedly.

Branchstripe shot Emberburn an amused glance and Emberburn let out a purr. Looking back to his apprentice, Branchstripe nodded. "I suppose you'll need to learn how to fight someday."

Stempaw looked pleadingly at Emberburn. "Can we join them?" He begged, tail flicking as Ravenpaw circled around him. "Please?"

Emberburn let out a purr and nodded. "Sure," he meowed and rose to his paws and stretched. When Stempaw brightened, he added sternly. "But we'll need to hunt soon after as it is leafbare."

Stempaw bounced on his toes and nodded eagerly. "Of course!" He meowed and looked at Ravenpaw. "I'll race you to the Tall Pines!" He called over his shoulder as he hurled himself towards the camp entrance.

"I'll win!" Ravenpaw retorted as he hurried after his brother.

Emberburn purred as him and Branchstripe padded after their apprentices. It felt freeing to see the two toms play and challenge each other when leafbare was still in the air. Branchstripe looked at him as they slid through the gorse tunnel and Emberburn flicked his

ear.

"I see how my sister looks at you," Branchstripe mewed slowly, trying to be smooth but failing. Emberburn flattened his ears to his head and avoided the warrior's gaze. "Don't worry," he soothed. "She's got good tastes."

"Thanks?" Emberburn meowed, looking at the tom in confusion.

Branchstripe flicked his tail. "She looks at you with such warmth, it's hard to question she'd do anything for you."

At his words, Stempaw let out a screech of pain and Emberburn pricked his ears in alarm. Branchstripe's eyes widened and took off past him, trying to get to the apprentice's petrified wailing. Emberburn took off after him and flew over the ground, claws unsheathed as he slammed into a tortoiseshell and white she-cat.

Together, they rolled in a flurry of claws and fur. Emberburn sank his teeth deep into the she-cats shoulder and raked his claws against her soft belly. The she-cat snarled and bit into his ear, ripping the tip off as she sprang away.

Emberburn scrambled to his paws and glared at the she-cat, eyes narrowing as he realized it was Maplewhisker, warrior of NightClan. "What does NightClan want with our apprentices?" He spat, lunging for her again. He knocked her to the ground and held a paw to her neck, eyes ablaze.

"They crossed the border," Maplewhisker spat in his face, twisting under his grasp and rolling away, springing to her paws. She bared her teeth and glared at Emberburn. "Doesn't DawnClan's warriors know how to keep their apprentices in line?" She hissed and darted toward him.

Emberburn dodged to the right and dragged his claws across her flank, hearing her hiss of pain as he spun around to face her. "Doesn't NightClan know to keep their whiskers out of another Clan's business?" He snarled, knowing his reply was weak but he had to defend his Clan's honor. "You're a pathetic excuse of a warrior, Maplewhisker."

"And you're a pathetic excuse," she retorted and leaped at him, paws outstretched with her claws extended. Emberburn reared on his hind legs to meet her and allowed her to knock him back. Thinking quickly, he wrenched around and threw her to the ground, pinning her to the forest floor.

"You're good, I'll admit that." He growled and lashed his tail. "But not good enough." He raked his claws down her chest before she could react and pummeled her belly with his hind claws.

Maplewhisker yowled in pain and kicked him away, only to stumble as she tried to get to her paws. "Fox-hearted weasel!" She snarled over her shoulder at Emberburn. "You'll pay for that!"

Emberburn snorted, triumph flooding through him. "Yeah, right," he glared at the she-cat. "Get out of my territory, Maplewhisker. And tell Squirrelstar that this will be brought up at the next Gathering."

Maplewhisker bared her teeth but swung her head around defeatedly and started to limp towards the border. Emberburn felt pride prick every hair on his pelt as he turned, padding back to the apprentices.

Branchstripe's head popped up as he appeared and bounded toward Emberburn. "Did you get rid of that NightClan warrior?" He demanded, his eyes sliding past him.

Emberburn nodded. "Yes, Maplewhisker limped across the border thinking about the wounds she'd have to lick in her nest." He purred and flicked his tail. "How are Stempaw and Ravenpaw?"

Branchstripe looked over his shoulder and let out a small sigh. "Stempaw has a few cuts and scratches, but he'll be fine." The fur on Emberburn's spine flattened with relief.

"And Ravenpaw?"

"Not a scratch, but a bit spooked." Branchstripe turned his back on Emberburn and padded back to the apprentices. Emberburn followed, seeing Stempaw lick his wounds as Ravenpaw crouched beside him, eyes wide and scared.

"Hey, you two," Emberburn meowed. Ravenpaw leaped into the air at his voice and stared in fear at the warrior. Stempaw simply looked up and brightened at the sight of his mentor.

"Emberburn!" Stempaw jumped to his paws and wove around his mentor, his eyes gleaming. "Did you chase off that mangy NightClan warrior?" He asked, his voice curious and excited.

Emberburn nodded and looked between the two brothers. "Maplewhisker will think twice before attacked you two again," he meowed, looking at Ravenpaw as the tom trembled. "You alright, Ravenpaw?"

Stempaw looked over his shoulder at his petrified brother and strode to his side. "He's just fine," he boasted and playfully shoved Ravenpaw. The apprentice nearly toppled over but Stempaw didn't seem to notice. "He faced that mange-pelt like a LionClan warrior!"

Branchstripe fixed his apprentice a worried look as Ravenpaw cast his eyes to his paws. "I think we should get back to the camp," he suggested, glancing at Emberburn. "To get Stempaw's wounds checked."

"I'm fine!" Stempaw protested, flexing his claws. "I could take on a patrol of GlacierClan warriors with my claws sheathed!" Even though his apprentice was clearing trying to show off, Emberburn couldn't help but admire his ignorance to his small injuries.

"Branchstripe's right, Stempaw." Emberburn looked apologetically at his apprentice. Stempaw seemed disappointed, so he added quickly. "We'll start with battle practice first thing tomorrow."

Stempaw perked up and nodded. "I'll beat you, Ravenpaw!" He meowed and brushed by Branchstripe to lead the way home. Ravenpaw seemed less interested in battle practice and more interested in his paws as he followed with his tail dragging behind him.

Branchstripe waited for Emberburn to catch up so they could walk side-by-side. "I saw you fighting Maplewhisker," he meowed casually. "You did well."

"Thanks." Emberburn felt confused. Why was he complimenting the same skills Branchstripe learned as an apprentice?

"Ravenpaw seems really shaken from the attack," mewed the dark honey-brown tabby as he looked up as a leaf fluttered down in front of them.

"He'll be fine," Emberburn meowed breezily. "Nothing a good night's sleep and some fresh-kill can't fix. Besides, Shellfur and Splashpaw will give him some herbs for his shock."

Branchstripe whisked his tail. "I know," he sighed. "He just seemed so terrified in the face of a fight that I wonder if he's doubting himself becoming a warrior."

Emberburn scoffed and looked at the dark-eyed warrior. "It was just a scare, he'll be just fine when we get back to camp." Looking ahead, he spotted the camp's bracken walls. "With you as his mentor, he'll be a warrior clawing the fur off NightClan's warriors in no time."

Branchstripe pricked his ears in surprise, eyes glowing with relief. "Really?" He meowed, sounding grateful.

Emberburn bumped his flank against his, blinking at him. "Of course," he purred. "Now, let's get some fresh-kill." As they nosed their way into the camp, Patchsnow turned her head from talking with Snowshine and bounded over.

"What happened during training?" She asked, looking from her brother to Emberburn and back again. "Stempaw's got injuries while Ravenpaw looks like he saw a ghost."

Branchstripe gave a sly look to Emberburn before slipping away, his tail twitching. Emberburn was tempted to call the tom back but his words caught in his throat as he saw the warmth in Patchsnow's yellow gaze. "Uh, there was a scuffle with a NightClan warrior." He managed to force out. "That's all."

Patchsnow's eyes widened and she started to sniff his pelt for injuries. "Are you okay?" She asked, sounding like a mother fussing

over a kit.

His pelt grew hot as she got close and he scuffed his paws. "I'm fine," he mumbled, suddenly aware of some cats looking at him with amusement. His ears flattened to his head and he shook out his fur. "What about you?" Emberburn flicked his tail. "What did you do while we were out?"

Patchsnow blinked at him before speaking. "Nothing much." She looked over at the warrior's den, where Snowshine was watching in amusement. The snowy she-cat nodded encouragingly to Patchsnow and mouthed something Emberburn couldn't catch.

"Well," he meowed, trying to not sound awkward. "I'm going to get something to eat. Want to come?" He asked, looking hopefully at Patchsnow.

The white-patched she-cat nodded and led the way to the prey-pile. Emberburn followed with a large smile on his face but couldn't help but see Hollyfire bundling Russetkit, Whiskerkit, and Deafkit out of the nursery and into the clearing.

"Come on, you three," purred Hollyfire as she nudged Deafkit forward. Since Emberburn taught his sister to communicate with her deaf kit, Deafkit has been thriving. "It's time for you to taste woodland prey instead of milk."

"But I like milk!" Whiskerkit complained, his tail sticking straight up in protest. "Why can't I have milk?"

"Because," Hollyfire mewed. "You're growing too fast and my milk is drying up. Besides, once you taste a mouse or a bird, you'll never want milk again."

Russetkit wove between her mother's legs, eyes sparkling with eagerness. "I can't wait to taste a mouse!" She announced and charged toward the pile. She licked her lips as she dove into the prey, her hind legs waggling as she shuffled around.

"Russetkit!" Hollyfire shot forward and dragged her it out by the tail. In the kits jaws was a small brown mouse, hanging by its tail.

"Wait your turn and be patient!"

Patchsnow let out a purr and Emberburn's whiskers twitched in amusement as Hollyfire put Russetkit on the ground with her mouse. "Eager kits, eh?" She meowed to Hollyfire.

"You have no idea, Patchsnow." Hollyfire meowed after giving Russetkit a stern look before glancing at the she-cat. Emberburn watched as Deafkit and Whiskerkit swarmed their sister and the mouse, their eyes as wide as twin moons.

"I want the first bite!" Whiskerkit declared, sinking his teeth into the mouse's haunches and trying to pull it away from Russetkit.

"Hey!" Russetkit battered his head with her paws, her eyes sharp. "I got it, therefore I should get the first bite!"

"Stop arguing in front of the warriors!" Deafkit cuffed his siblings over the ears and looked up at Emberburn and Patchsnow. Emberburn nodded to the black-and-white tom.

Hollyfire shook her head and scooped up Deafkit in her mouth and herded the other two arguing kits towards the nursery. She cast an apologetic look over her shoulder before ducking inside.

Emberburn shook his head and let out a purr of amusement. "They'll be great apprentices," he meowed and snatched a squirrel. "Want to share?"

Patchsnow nodded and followed Emberburn toward the warrior's den and sat to the side of the den entrance. "Will Deafkit become a warrior's apprentice?" She asked as Emberburn dropped the prey.

"Of course he will," he snorted and ripped a strip of meat from the squirrel and started chewing. "Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he's deaf," Patchsnow replied and glanced over at Emberburn. "I mean, no deaf cat has ever been a warrior before."

Emberburn swallowed his bite and felt his neck fur began to bristle. "That doesn't mean he can't become one," he meowed, his voice tainted with a challenge. "He'll be a fantastic warrior."

Patchsnow said nothing more and tucked in. As they ate in silence, Emberburn watched as Mosspelt and Gingerheart padded side-by-side out of the medicine den, purring with their tails intertwined. Emberburn gulped down his bite and nudged Patchsnow with a paw, nodding to the two mates when she looked at him.

Patchsnow swallowed and rose to her paws. "I wonder what happened that made Gingerheart so happy," she commented in a purr.

"Something good," Emberburn guessed and rose to his paws. He bounded toward the couple and stopped a few mouse-lengths away. "What's up? I saw you two leaving Shellfur's den."

Gingerheart looked at him with a warm gleam in his eye, so different than the usual scowl of disapproval he usually gave Emberburn. "Mosspelt is expecting my kits." He breathed and rubbed his cheek against Mosspelt's.

Emberburn stared at his sister in astonishment. "Really?" He felt something inside his chest burst and he bounced on his toes. "That's amazing! I'll go tell Hollyfire!" Without waiting for a reply, he spun around and raced for the nursery. "Hollyfire!" He called as he ducked inside the den.

There was a groan from the far corner as Mistlesky lifted her head, her flanks round and nearly bursting. "Quiet down, Emberburn." She meowed blearily, blinking at him. "She's taking her kits for a walk. What's the matter anyway?"

"Mosspelt is expecting kits!" Emberburn meowed, unable to hold back his excitement.

Mistlesky purred and let out a yawn. "That's great," she meowed and looked up at him as she laid her chin on her paws. "When are you and Patchsnow planning on having kits?"

Emberburn hardly heard her question as the brambles behind him quivered as Whiskerkit charged inside, Russetkit and Deafkit hot on his heels.

"Wait for me!" Hollyfire called as she slipped inside, her eyes tired and she yawned. She stopped by her brother's side, shaking her head as her kits played in her nest. "I love them but sometimes I wish I could claw their ears." Turning her head, she looked up at Emberburn. "Patchsnow said you ran off here, what's up?"

Emberburn wove around his sister, eyes sparkling with excitement. "Mosspelt is expecting kits!" He purred.

Hollyfire's eyes widened before she purred. "Gingerheart is the father, isn't he?" She guessed and smiled as Emberburn nodded. "I guess you two will have to get along."

Emberburn nodded, but the thought of his sisters having their kits scared him. *I'll be the only cat who has no kits,* he thought. It made his mood dull, but it brightened when he realized the kits would be his kin! "I'd better go," he dipped his head to the two queens and scurried out of the nursery.

Pebblestar was sitting on the Jagged Stone, looking ready to call a meeting. Emberburn bounded up to the stones and hauled himself up, wincing as the stone bit at his pads. When he made his way to the top, he headed for his leader and sat down.

"I heard from Shellfur that Mosspelt is expecting," Pebblestar meowed, looking at Emberburn out of the corner of his eye. "You must be thrilled."

Emberburn nodded and felt excitement prick his paws. "Yeah," he breathed and watched Mosspelt and Gingerheart slip into the warrior's den together. "It'll be great having more kin around."

A purr rumbled deep in Pebblestar's throat and Emberburn joined in. "I remember when all I wanted was more kin in my Clan," he meowed, sounding wistful. Emberburn glanced at the leader in surprise. "My family rest in StarClan while I'm living." He explained.

"But you have cousins living in the Clan right now," he pointed out, wanting to soothe his leader. "Fennelfur is a great warrior and will do anything to help you."

Pebblestar flicked his tail, which hung over the edge of the rock. "I know that," he meowed. "What I mean is I have no kits, no mate, no parents in the elder's den that can tell stories."

"Are you in a rush to have kits?" Emberburn found himself asking.

Pebblestar shook his head, amused. "No, but I'd like to have a mate and kits of my own someday." He looked across the treetops and sighed. "One day, I want to see what's beyond that border." He jerked his muzzle to the far horizon.

Emberburn looked at his leader, surprised. "I thought you loved being in DawnClan." He commented, his tail twitching in curiosity.

Pebblestar let out a brief purr. "Of course I love being in DawnClan, but I want to know what's going on outside Clan territory." He meowed and turned to Emberburn. "I'm turning in for the night. See you in the morning, Emberburn." He touched noses with the warrior and made his way down the Jagged Stone.

Emberburn watched him go before looking across the horizon as the sun started to dip below the trees. What was life like beyond warrior territory? Was it better or worse? *Maybe I'll find out, as Pebblestar said.* Rising to his paws, he turned and followed his leader.

Chapter Nine

Emberburn flicked his tail as he waited for Stempaw to catch up. The full moon was glowing coldly above them as they headed for the Gathering Island. The frost on the grass and chilly air nipped at their ear tips and made their noses run. Behind them, the new apprentices, Deafpaw, Russetpaw, and Whiskerpaw struggled to keep up with the rest of their Clanmates. Made apprentices a few sunrises prior, the three apprentices were loving their apprenticeship.

Russetpaw had caught a mouse on her first day of becoming Adderseed's apprentice and she had boasted about it for two days before her mentor scolded her and told her to stop. Since then, she'd become more and more determined to be better than her brothers in everything.

Whiskerpaw had toured the entire territory on his first day and slept in the next morning. His mentor, Fallingash, was forgiving but gave him a stern lesson that warriors didn't sleep in and started working early in the morning. He quickly discovered that the prey-pile didn't fill itself and had to go on his first practice hunt sometime later.

Deafpaw got Snowshine as his mentor and Pebblestar's reasoning behind it was that since Deafpaw was deaf, Snowshine would have a better time with him. Since Snowshine was deaf in the side she had a blue eye on, which was her left eye, she could understand what the tom was going through. The two developed a close bond since his apprenticeship and Snowshine enjoyed his interest whenever she patted the ground, twitched her whiskers, flicked her tail, moved her paws, or made any gesture that he understood. Emberburn respected the she-cat more that she was mentoring his young nephew and had high hopes in his future.

Emberburn bounded ahead as Stempaw reached him and stopped beside Branchstripe. Ravenpaw refused to attend in case they ran

into Maplewhisker again, so Pebblestar allowed him to stay behind and sleep while Stempaw and the other apprentices went to the Gathering.

"It's a shame Ravenpaw wanted to stay behind," Stempaw mewed when he'd caught up. His glowing yellow eyes were like two suns that shone in the dark of leafbare, ridding the forest of any darkness. "I wanted to go to our first Gathering together."

Branchstripe twitched his ear at him but kept his gaze fixed ahead. "You have your other denmates to share your experience with, Stempaw." He meowed, his voice sounding dark and far away. "Besides, there will be other Gatherings for you and Ravenpaw to share."

Stempaw glanced at Emberburn and awkwardly nodded. "I guess," he meowed and slackened his pace to walk beside Russetpaw and Boulderpaw, who were talking about prey and training.

Emberburn saw Pebblestar stop and he raised his tail for the patrol to stop before plunging into the hollow. The rest of the Gathering patrol, which was considerably larger than a regular hunting or border patrol. It consisted of Pebblestar, the new deputy Petaltail, Emberburn, Branchstripe, all the apprentices other than Ravenpaw, all the mentors, Leaffire, Echospeck, and Halfsnow. Fennelfur had to step down as deputy yesterday because she was expecting Firestripe's kits. Pebblestar was glad that she was having kits and gave the deputy position to Petaltail, one of the only senior warriors left.

"Stempaw," Emberburn looked over his shoulder at his apprentice and jerked his muzzle forward. When the tom padded up to him, he meowed. "Remember that just because there's a truce, you should be looking for a fight. Keep your wits, be polite, don't say too much or too little, and learn the actions of your enemies."

Stempaw tilted his head to the side. "How do I know I've said too much or too little?" He asked, his voice confused.

Branchstripe glanced at the apprentice. "Just be careful of what you say is what your mouse-brained mentor is implying." He meowed,

looking at Emberburn with a wink. "The other Clans think that if a cat says too little, they're keeping something from the other Clans. They think that if a cat is saying too much, they're keeping something from the other Clans."

"So it's a lose lose?" Stempaw meowed, frowning.

Emberburn snorted. "Pretty much," he meowed. "Stay away from GlacierClan, too. At least, don't say too much in front of them. They've never been friendly with the other Clans."

"Let's go, DawnClan!" Pebblestar called over his shoulder and disappeared into the undergrowth that led to the hollow. Emberburn took a breath before following him.

The scents of many cats filled his nostrils and his head began to spin. Taking a few deep breaths, he controlled his beating heart and spinning head enough to break apart from his Clanmates and approach a group of OakClan warriors.

One of them, a pretty blue-tabby she-cat by the name of Blueheart saw him and blinked at him. "Emberburn," she meowed, her voice breezy.

The other two warriors, Redstripe and Graywolf turned their heads and looked at Emberburn as though he'd grown another tail or head. Their judgmental eyes pierced through his thick tortoiseshell fur and he narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"What?" He meowed, his voice brittle and harsh. He glared at Graywolf and Redstripe until they adverted their gaze away and slunk into the growing crowd.

"They have a right to be wary of you and your littermates, you know," Blueheart commented, looking at him without the wariness her Clanmates had. "Your mother was once their leader, after all."

"My littermates and I are nothing like Nightstar, Blueheart." Emberburn spat, claws tearing apart the grass beneath his paws. "We have no drive to become like her."

Blueheart shrugged and took a pace towards him, making him

tense. She drifted her gaze along his back to his eyes and blinked. "You've got the same light in your eyes as her," she commented. Her tone wasn't menacing, but interested. "Some cats are wary of you because of your eye color."

"Gee," he growled, looking away hastily to glare at his paws as they worked against the ground. "Thanks for stating the obvious."

Blueheart shifted closer to him until their pelts nearly brushed. "You know," she meowed in his ear. "You would make a lot more friends outside your Clan if you let them in."

Emberburn let out a short hiss and lashed his tail from side to side. "I have plenty of friends in my Clan, thank you very much." He retorted. "And I don't *need* cats from other Clans poking their noses where they don't belong." Without waiting for her to respond, Emberburn spun around and stalked away, irritation prickling on every hair on his pelt. *Why was Blueheart so interested in me?* He wondered as he passed a small group of NightClan and OakClan cats, who started whispering as he went by.

"Emberburn!" The call of a voice he didn't recognize made him look up, jolting him out of his thoughts of irritation and he saw a dark-gray-and-white she-cat waving her tail at him. "Come over here!"

Without leaving him much of a choice, Emberburn bounded up to the she-cat and settled down next to her, overlooking the large group of Clan cats. "I've never seen you in battle before," he meowed and looked at the she-cat.

She laughed. "Of course not," she purred and something inside Emberburn released its hold on him, making him feel free. "I'm no warrior at all. I'm a medicine cat, OakClan's to be exact."

"So, you're Lilyrose?" Emberburn guessed, to which she nodded. "Then why do you want to talk to me instead of the other medicine cats?" He asked, confused as he looked at the she-cat.

"Because I can," Lilyrose meowed, her light blue eyes twinkling with mischief. "And because they can get a bit boring after a while. It's nice to talk to someone who is from another Clan and isn't a

medicine cat like me."

"I guess that makes sense," he admitted and flicked his tail. "How's OakClan?"

"We're good," Lilyrose replied. "Not as many battles with GlacierClan as usual, but I'm glad." He caught her eyes and she explained. "The more battles are fought, the more herbs I'm forced to use to heal the warriors' wounds. It's great having more herbs when I'm used to using them."

"What do the herbs do?"

Lilyrose blinked at him in surprise. "What do you mean?" She asked.

Emberburn cleared his throat. "What specific herb does what?" He asked, hoping his question didn't sound too foreign.

Understanding flooded into Lilyrose's light blue eyes and she nodded. "Ah," she meowed. "Well, that depends on which herb you're talking about. Goldenrod is great for healing wounds, so I typically wrap a leaf or two into a wound. Marigold and horsetail keep infection from entering the wound and cobwebs stop bleeding and help hold an herb-wrap from falling apart."

"What about other herbs?" Emberburn asked, genuinely curious. He'd never learned about any of the herbs, as he never needed to since he was a warrior. The information was interesting and he leaned towards her, ears pricked like a kit listening to an elder's story.

"Borage helps with a queen's milk flow, making more milk for the kits that are still nursing. But it also brings down fevers, helps soothe bellyaches, and can relieve a cat from a tight chest." Lilyrose meowed, her eyes glazing as she recalled the information. Emberburn listened intensely, drinking in everything the she-cat was saying. "Burdock root keeps infection from getting into a rat bite and soothes the wound. However, it can give a cat a bellyache if they eat too much of it at once. It's also fantastic for infected paws."

"That's cool." Emberburn breathed, astonished. "How do you memorize every herb and its use?"

Lilyrose purred. "Practice, and a lot of it." Turning her head, she flicked her tail. "Looks like the Gathering is going to start." She commented and Emberburn followed her gaze.

Atop the largest tree in the clearing, the Clan leaders sat on various branches of various heights. Pebblestar and Squirrelstar sat on the same branch, about five or six tail-lengths off the ground. Frostar sat on a branch one tail-length higher than them with Sparrowstar of GlacierClan next to her.

"Cats of all Clans!" The GlacierClan leader's voice bounced off the surrounding trees and Emberburn flattened his ears. "Let this moon's Gathering begin!" Sitting down, she nodded to Frostar.

The brown tabby OakClan leader dipped her head and faced the gathered cats. "OakClan has two new apprentices among us!" She announced and her frosty blue gaze rested on a dark gray patched she-cat with light green eyes and a cream pointed tabby with dark blue eyes. "Meadowpaw and Hailpaw!"

"Meadowpaw! Hailpaw!" Cheered the cats that surrounded the apprentices, who looked embarrassed from all the attention.

"That is all OakClan has to report." Frostar ducked her head and shifted on the branch.

Sparrowstar spoke. "I will go next," she meowed. "GlacierClan has nothing to report but that prey is running well and we are stronger than ever."

Emberburn leaned over to Lilyrose and murmured in her ear. "They look skinnier than they usually are." He commented quietly.

Lilyrose replied in a hushed voice. "They're always trying to prove their the best Clan around the lake." She meowed, her voice amused. "Even if they have a tree stuck up their rear."

Emberburn choked back a laugh and tried to focus when it was Pebblestar's turn to speak.

"DawnClan has a lot of good news," he purred and flicked his tail. "DawnClan has ten new apprentices! Bumblepaw, Berrypaw, Splashpaw, Stempaw, Ravenpaw, Mistpaw, Boulderpaw, Deafpaw, Whiskerpaw, and Russetpaw!"

As the apprentices' names were echoed by the cheering crowd, Emberburn caught sight of a ground of NightClan cats casting the apprentices a look of disgust and he forced his fur to lie flat.

Pebblestar went on. "Our nursery is bursting with new kits as two queens moved in and four new kits have been born to Mistlesky." He dipped his head. "We also have some sad news. About two moons ago, our beloved elder, Whiteblaze, passed away and walks with StarClan."

Froststar's eyes clouded with pain, as did the majority of OakClan's cats and she bowed her head. "Whiteblaze was an amazing warrior," she meowed, her voice tight with grief. "She will be missed dearly by OakClan."

Murmurs of agreement echoed her words and Pebblestar nodded.

"One of our warriors, Goosewing, was killed in a fox attack early this moon and also resides in StarClan with Whiteblaze. The attack also maimed one of our most prized warriors, Rosefern, and left her horribly scarred. In honor of Goosewing's death, Rosefern requested her name be changed to Tornface. She's not here at the Gathering, but resides in the elder's den now."

The clearing was silent for a long while before Sparrowstar spoke. "The loss of any warrior is a loss to all of us." She meowed. "Goosewing and Tornface's sacrifices will never be forgotten."

Pebblestar held the GlacierClan leader's gaze before dipping his head. "That is all I have to report."

Squirrelstar was the last to give her report. "Our nursery is bustling with a new litter born to Snowmask!" She announced and her words brought mews of congratulations from the other cats. "That is all I have to report this moon."

Pebblestar rose to his paws. "I declare this moon's Gathering at an end," he meowed. "Please go to your respected leader and leave." As he spoke, he started making his way down the tree.

Lilyrose turned to Emberburn so quickly, it made him jump. "I'll see you around, Emberburn." She meowed and Emberburn nodded. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Lilyrose." He meowed, dipping his head respectfully before turning and bounding away toward his Clanmates.

Stempaw's whiskers twitched as he made it to his side. "Who was that?" He meowed, nodding to where Lilyrose was joining her Clanmates. "She's pretty."

"That's Lilyrose, OakClan's medicine cat," Emberburn replied and flicked his tail. "She's nice."

"Seemed like it," purred the apprentice as he looked at his mentor. "What'd you guys talk about?"

Emberburn dodged the question with his own. *I don't have to answer every question he has,* he decided. "How was your first Gathering as an apprentice?"

Stempaw flicked his tail, acknowledging that his mentor changed the subject. "It was fine, kind of boring though." He meowed and yawned. "I'm so tired."

"Guess you should've stayed behind with Ravenpaw, huh?" Emberburn teased, bumping his shoulder against Stempaw's, nearly knocking the young cat off his paws. "Don't worry, we'll start training closer to sunhigh instead of right away."

Stempaw's eyes flashed playfully. "I though warriors didn't sleep in," he meowed.

"Only when there's a Gathering can some warriors and nosy apprentices sleep in," Emberburn replied cheekily and yawned. "Come on, I hear my nest calling me."

***

Emberburn opened his eyes to see mist swirling around him, seeming to lift him up onto his paws. He was back in the Dark Forest where he'd met with his mother. *Maybe she'll be here again.* Scanning the dead trees, he made out the shape of a cat making their way towards him. "Nightstar?" He called out warily.

"It's just me," replied the voice of his mother as she slipped toward him. Her eyes were as bright as ever as she looked at him, a soft smile plastered across her face. "Welcome back, Emberburn."

"Guess what?" He meowed excitedly, weaving around her with his tail sticking straight up. Nightstar lifted an eyebrow and Emberburn whisked his tail. "Mosspelt is expecting Gingerheart's kits!"

Nightstar's eyes widened before she broke into a rattling purr. "I'm glad Poppybee and Clearstar's kit is having kits with my daughter." She meowed and blinked up at him. "What about you? Do you plan on having kits too?"

Emberburn flattened his ears in embarrassment and averted his gaze from hers. "I don't know," he mumbled. "Maybe one day."

Nightstar purred in amusement. "You still have plenty of time to think about kits." She meowed and nudged his shoulder with her nose. "You're hardly more than a kit yourself."

Emberburn rolled his eyes and looked down at his mother, a sudden fondness washing over him and he purred. There was a moment of silence before a shrill screech ripped through the air and made them both jump. "What in StarClan's name was *that?"* He demanded, looking sharply at his mother, who just seemed tired.

"Halfthroat's training cats again," she meowed dismissively with a wave of her tail. The lighter tip seemed to glow in the small amount of light that the Dark Forest had. "He never seems to stop taking apprentices to train."

Emberburn flattened his ears to his head and barged passed her, heading for the source of the cry of pain. Nightstar was hot on his heels but didn't try to stop him. Ducking below a low branch of a tree, he thrust his way through a clump of ferns and tasted the

rancid air. A million unfamiliar scents filled his nose and he resisted the urge to gag. Something was off about two of the new smells, though. His eyes narrowed as he pressed on with Nightstar on his tail. The familiar scents grew stronger and he stopped when he saw three shapes in front of him. Two of the shapes were wrestling while a gray tom watched, his neck scarred.

"Come on, Berrypaw!" He snarled, his tail lashing as he paced around the flurry of fur. "Don't be a mouse-heart, strike harder!"

Emberburn froze. *Berrypaw is here?* He blinked as he watched the blue tabby apprentice being shoved to the ground, claws around his throat, prepared to take away his life. *Get up and fight back!* He willed the apprentice. Then, the cat pinning him to the ground sheathed their claws and got off him.

Berrypaw scrambled to his paws, breathing hard with a strange light in his eyes Emberburn hadn't seen before. The tabby apprentice looked at the gray cat, his tail flicking. "Can I do it again?" He begged. "I can do this!"

The other cat sneered. "Yeah, right!" The voice was startlingly familiar and another, a colder chill ran down his spine. It was Bumblepaw, Splashpaw, and Berrypaw's sister. "You barely held yourself when fighting me!"

Berrypaw snapped his head around and glared at his littermate, rage burning brightly in his fire-like orange eyes. "Only because you pinned me!" He snapped, teeth bared at his sister.

"Enough!" Emberburn burst through the ferns and glared at both the apprentices. Both of them turned their heads and their eyes gleamed with shock.

"Emberburn?" Berrypaw meowed, sounding surprised. "You train here?"

Emberburn growled at the apprentice. "Of course not!" He spat. "What are you two doing here, training with these fox-hearted traitors? You're breaking the warrior code!"

Bumblepaw sniffed, her eyes glinting. "We're becoming better warriors," she retorted.

"You're being trained to kill your opponent!" Emberburn flashed back at her and watched as she recoiled with a hiss. "What were you two thinking? Or were you thinking when this flea-bag was promising you glory in bloodshed?"

The gray tom took a step forward, his green eyes blazing with defiance. "Watch your tongue, DawnClan scum." He growled and Emberburn narrowed his eyes at him. "I'll shred you where you stand!"

Nightstar suddenly appeared at his side, baring her teeth at the tom. "Back off, Halfthroat." She hissed, her back arched.

Halfthroat glared at her and lashed his tail back and forth like a snake ready to strike. "Protecting your kit, Nightstar?" He sneered. "Show your belly, apprentice, before you get hurt."

"Have you forgotten who was killed by *illness?*" She straightened and Halfthroat hissed. Emberburn guessed his mother and Halfthroat had some kind of history.

"You were killed by your kits!" Halfthroat flattened his ears.

"At least I don't train kits!" She snapped and Emberburn looked at the apprentices, who were watching with eager excitement. *They're waiting for a fight.* Dread washed over him and he looked back to the two arguing cats.

"Yeah, right!" Halfthroat snorted. "You decided to train these two!"

Emberburn cut in. "Leave these apprentices alone, Halfthroat." He bared his teeth as the tom looked at him. "Or I'll personally shred you to pieces." Whipping his head around to Berrypaw and Bumblepaw, he added sternly. "I'll be telling your mentors and Pebblestar about this." Before either apprentice could reply, he closed his eyes and willed himself to wake up.

***

The sun rose slowly over the trees and Emberburn blinked open his eyes groggily. His dream of the Dark Forest was fresh in his mind and he fumbled to his paws, nearly tripping over Leaffire's tail before stumbling out of the warrior's den. He blinked his sleepiness away and strode toward the apprentice's den and peeked inside. Seeing Bumblepaw and Berrypaw still sleeping in their nests, he let out a sharp hiss. "Wake up!"

Berrypaw's head shot up and he leaped to his paws, eyes half-closed. "Is there a battle?" He slurred, his eyes glazed and bleary.

Bumblepaw lifted her head and blinked, yawning. "What's going on?" She muttered, rising from her nest.

Emberburn growled, reached inside, and dragged the two siblings out by their tails. They shrieked in pain and tried to wriggle free, but Emberburn sank his teeth deeper into their tail tips and headed for Pebblestar's den. As he pulled the apprentices inside, he huffed and yanked them toward Pebblestar's nest where he was eating a squirrel. "Pebblestar," he meowed and threw the apprentices to the ground in front of him.

"Emberburn?" The leader turned his head and rose to his paws in confusion. "What's going on? Why did you drag them in here?"

Emberburn shoved the two apprentices toward the leader and narrowed his eyes as they cowered beneath the leader's blue gaze. *Cowards,* he curled his lip and looked at Pebblestar. "I found these two training with Halfthroat in the Dark Forest." He growled and Pebblestar's eyes widened. "They were training to fight each other and training to kill."

Pebblestar's tail bushed out and he cast his angered glare on the two apprentices. "I have no idea what went through your heads when you decided to train with that tyrant." He growled, his lip curled. Bumblepaw looked at her paws while Berrypaw whimpered and crouched closer to the ground. "But your actions will not go unpunished. You both will not be attending the next six Gatherings, will not hunt or fight for three moons, and will be confined to the camp. If you leave, you must ask for permission and have at least one warrior escort. All the while, you must care for the elders." He

cuffed each of the apprentices's over the ears in turn. "Am I clear?"

"Yes, Pebblestar," they meowed in shameful unison and turned around to face Emberburn before they scurried out of the den.

When they were gone, Pebblestar spoke calmly to Emberburn. "My only question is why were *you* in the Dark Forest?" He meowed, his calmness making icy cold water wash over him.

"I'm not training with any cat," Emberburn assured him quickly. "About a moon ago, I was brought there by my mother and we just talked about what's been going on." When Pebblestar tensed, he hurried on. "Nothing about our secrets but I've been going there to meet with her and talk. When I was there last night to see her, I saw Berrypaw and Bumblepaw."

Pebblestar was quiet for a few moments and Emberburn shifted his weight from paw to paw as he waited for his leader's response. *Is he angry that I met with her?* "Very well, Emberburn." The tabby leader meowed eventually and nodded slowly. "Thank you for reporting the apprentices. You are dismissed."

Emberburn dipped his head to Pebblestar and headed out of the den. He didn't realize his heart was beating faster than he thought and he struggled to breathe evenly for a moment. A cry from the nursery made his ears perk up and he spotted Fennelfur, who was expecting Firestep's kits and had just moved into the nursery, slid from the brambles, and called out.

"Shellfur!" The queen nervously glanced over her shoulder into the den entrance. "Shellfur! Splashpaw!"

Emberburn felt a pang of sympathy for the new queen and trotted toward the medicine cat den and poked his head inside. "Shellfur? Splashpaw?" He called out anxiously, but no cat responded. Dread filled him as he turned around and met Fennelfur's gaze, shaking his head.

Fennelfur's eyes clouded and she began to panic. "Mistlesky is kitting!" She meowed and headed back into the nursery, her tail flailing after her.

Emberburn hesitated before slipping back into the medicine cat den. He hurried toward the herb stores and scoured the stocks for something that looked useful for a kitting queen. He spotted some stalks with blue-purple petals and took a pawful. Snatching some tiny black seeds Splashpaw called poppy seeds, as well as a large green leaf Shellfur, had called chervil. He burst from the den and saw the clearing ringed with watching cats and saw Coppersight watching him with wide orange eyes.

He heard Mistlesky let out a shrill cry and Emberburn dove into the nursery and hurried toward the screeching she-cat's cries. He dropped the herbs he'd brought and gulped. He didn't know what to do, he wasn't a medicine cat, after all. Taking a breath, he placed a paw on Mistlesky's rippling flank and looked at the queen. "It's going to be okay, Mistlesky." He wasn't sure if he was telling her or himself. Looking up at Fennelfur, he added. "Get a stick for her." Recalling the time when Gingerheart gave Hollyfire a stick when she gave birth to her kits.

Fennelfur nodded and darted out of the den and Emberburn rasped his tongue over Mistlesky's head soothingly. "A-am I going to be okay?" Whimpered the she-cat as she looked up at him, pain clear in her eyes.

"Er, yes." He meowed and looked over his shoulder as Fennelfur dove back into the den, a fat stick in her jaws. Emberburn nodded and watched as Fennelfur gave the stick to Mistlesky, who took it eagerly in her jaws. "Take a deep breath, Mistlesky, and get ready," Emberburn warned. When she nodded, he narrowed his eyes. "Push!"

Mistlesky sank her teeth into the stick and bit down, letting out a long, agonized groan as her tail bushed out and lashed back and forth. Emberburn's ears pricked up as a small shape slithered onto the soft moss and nipped at the membrane around it and took the kit by the scruff. He met Fennelfur's gaze and gave the kit to her, breathing in the sweet milky scent before focusing once more.

"It's a she-cat," Fennelfur meowed between licks as she looked at the tiny body. The kit started to squirm and let out little cries, paws flailing. "She's adorable, Mistlesky."

Mistlesky put her front paws on the stick, her eyes burning with love as she looked at her daughter. Suddenly, her blue eyes flooded with pain as she bit down on the stick again.

When the membrane around the kit was broken, Emberburn was astonished as the kit starting squealing as loud as possible. Turning his head, he called for three cats. "Coppersight! Stoneblaze! Snowshine!"

At once, the three cats appeared at the mouth of the den and hurried inside, their eyes as wide as moons. Snowshine gawked at the two kits and quickly took the squealing kit and started to lick it.

Emberburn placed his paw on the queen's flank, he felt two other bodies and shivered. "Just two more, Mistlesky." He meowed, suddenly feeling like a medicine cat. "You're doing great." The she-cat wailed in pain and Emberburn gave the kit to Stoneblaze, who accepted at once and licked the tiny scrap. When the final kit thumped into the moss at the base of Mistlesky's tail, Emberburn gave it to Coppersight and sat back on his haunches. "You have a wonderful family, Mistlesky." He purred, feeling satisfied and exhausted.

The queens wrenched her head around and blinked tiredly up at him. "H-how many are there?" She rasped weakly. Emberburn looked at Stoneblaze, who was finished cleaning up his kit and told him to get some soaked moss.

Looking back to the she-cat, he purred. "Four healthy little rascals that will always be under paw." He nosed the stick away from her paws and sat back on his haunches. "Two daughters and two sons to keep you busy."

Thundering paws behind him made him spin around to see Shellfur and Splashpaw burst into the den, their flanks heaving. "W-we're here!" Gasped the spotted gray tom, eyes wide as he looked at Emberburn. "We heard Mistlesky was kitting and we-" His green gaze slid from the warriors to the queen as her kits started to suckle and he faltered. "Are-are they okay?"

Splashpaw padded toward the queen and sniffed each kit, eyes

wide. "They're healthy," she reported and looked at Emberburn. "You have blood on your paws."

Confused, he looked at his front paws and blinked. His paws were soaked in blood and he looked at Shellfur, alarmed. "I didn't kill anyone!" He blurted out.

Fennelfur purred. "It's normal for a kitting," she meowed and looked at the two medicine cats. "Emberburn helped Mistlesky with her kitting. He did great." She turned her warm look to the warrior, who flattened his ears in embarrassment.

"I-I did what I thought was what you did," he looked sheepishly at Shellfur, who looked surprised.

"You did well," Splashpaw meowed, rubbing her cheek against his affectionately. "Maybe you should take my place as Shellfur's apprentice." She joked, and Emberburn shook his head.

Shellfur said nothing as he padded by and gave the herbs Emberburn had brought a once-over. "How did you know to bring these?" He asked over his shoulder as he fed Mistlesky two poppy seeds and some chervil.

Emberburn felt his pelt grow hot under the stare of so many cats. Stoneblaze, Coppersight, and Snowshine had left the den and Fennelfur was settling back into her nest. "I-I remembered that chervil is good for kitting because I hear you saying it all the time." He admitted. "And I see poppy seeds all the time and I guessed with the borage since Splashpaw took it to Hollyfire when she was nursing."

Shellfur nodded and flicked his tail. "Good job, Emberburn. You can go out now."

Relieved that he didn't have to be cooped up inside the den any longer, he ducked out and was flooded by his Clanmates, all of which were bursting with questions.

"How is Mistlesky?" Asked Adderseed.

"How many kits are there?" Stempaw bounced on his toes as he circled his mentor, eyes shining.

"Are the kits okay?" Called Petaltail.

"Hey," Patchsnow's voice startled him and he blinked to see her bumping her flank against his. "Are you alright?" Her eyes were brimmed with concern as she searched his gaze.

Emberburn nodded. "I'm just tired," he murmured and looked around.

Patchsnow raised her voice. "You can all ask questions later." She meowed and flicked her tail protectively around Emberburn. "He's going to fall asleep on his paws if he doesn't get to his nest." She started shouldering her way through the crowd with Emberburn in tow. As they entered the warrior's den, she settled him into his nest, curling herself around him. "Get some rest." Her breath made his ear fur tickle his ear and he sighed, eyes closing. "You've had an eventful day."

Emberburn felt her tongue rasp over his pelt and he let out a tired purr before the blackness that nipped at the back of his eyes washed over him and he fell into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter Ten

Lilyrose pulled the thorn out of Hailpaw's pad and spat it onto the stone floor. Reaching over, she chewed the leaves of marigold and smeared it over the puncture, finishing it off with a cobweb wrap. "There you go, Hailpaw." She purred and licked the apprentice's head. "Stay in camp for a few days and come to me if it keeps hurting or feels infected."

Hailpaw shook out her paw and looked up at the medicine cat. "Thanks, Lilyrose," she meowed and limped out of the den, her injured paw raised in the air.

The dark gray and white she-cat blinked as she watched her go and sighed. *Now what?* Turning around, she gave her herb stores a once-over and flicked her tail. Her belly rumbled and she blinked. *I could use a meal,* she swiped her tongue over her lips and headed out of her den.

As the only medicine cat, the workload and stress left her barely enough time to steal some prey from the prey-pile, and catch a few winks of sleep. Now in leafbare, no cats were getting horribly injured as they spent the majority of their time hunting. It was good, of course, but part of her wanted something to happen so she'd have something to do.

Reaching the prey-pile she snatched a pigeon and dragged it to the nearest pine tree, one of the only in the large oak forest. As she started to rip out the feathers for her nest, the sound of pawsteps approached her and she looked up to see Sedgepelt.

"Hi, Lilyrose." The she-cat dipped her head and sat down next to the medicine cat. Lilyrose flicked her ear at the warrior as she sank her teeth into the flesh of the bird and started chewing.

"Hi, Sedgepelt," she meowed through bites and looked at the warrior. Chewing her mouthful, she swallowed and prodded the prey toward her. "What's up?"

Sedgepelt crouched down and took a bite and Lilyrose washed her ears quickly before the white she-cat responded. Her yellow eye was fixed on the pigeon and Lilyrose knew that her other eye, which was blue, was the side she was deaf on. *At least no cat will be telling her any secrets on that side,* she thought to herself. "I've been having some belly pains for a quarter-moon." She meowed. "I thought it was something I ate but when it kept happening, I decided to see you."

Lilyrose nodded and shifted closer to the white warrior and placed a paw on her flank. After feeling around for a moment, she felt something hit her paw pad very lightly and Sedgepelt groaned. *I knew it.* "Congratulations, Sedgepelt," she purred. "You're expecting kits."

The warrior looked startled and she backed away from her, eyes round with fear. "B-but I'm not ready to be a mother!" She stumbled over her words, panicking.

Lilyrose blinked at her and tried to soothe her. "It'll be okay," she meowed, her voice even and calm. "Their father will help you raise them. Where is he?" She scanned the clearing, but couldn't find whoever looked like Sedgepelt's potential mate.

Sedgepelt frantically shook her head, eyes flooded with panic. "N-no he won't." She whimpered, pressing her belly to the ground with her tail wrapping around herself. "He doesn't want kits!"

"Who is the father of your kits?" Lilyrose asked, trying not to sound offensive or hostile.

Sedgepelt jumped at her question and mumbled something she couldn't catch. "I-I can't have these kits," she meowed, her voice breaking. "Please, Lilyrose, when these kits are born, can you take them?"

The question slammed into the medicine cat like a blow and she stared at the warrior in shock. *Me? Be a mother to the kits when I'm a medicine cat?* "I- of course." She meowed without thinking. "I'll take them when they're born."

Sedgepelt nodded stiffly and slithered away. Lilyrose watched her go and headed back to her half-eaten pigeon, suddenly feeling less hungry. Picking up the prey, she carried to the elder's den where Iceleaf would most likely be hungry. After leaving the bird at the den entrance, she headed back to her den and padded inside, thoughts whirling.

She sighed as she sat down in her nest, head spinning. *If I had an apprentice, I could've easily taken Sedgepelt's future kits.* Lilyrose thought with a shudder, casting a glance at the den entrance, wanting to go to Froststar and tell her about the situation. *Maybe I can convince her to give me an apprentice.* Doubt crawled into her belly as she shoved the thought away. *Only Hailpaw and Meadowpaw are the only apprentices, and they're content in being warriors.*

Lilyrose settled into her nest and thrust her nose under her forepaw with a sigh. She closed her eyes and shifted. When sleep didn't claim her as she wanted, she laid there with her eyes closed. Something tugged at her heart and an image appeared in her mind. It was a cat- a tom to be exact- and he looked rather familiar. He was a tortoiseshell, fairly uncommon but not out of nowhere, but his eyes were the color of heather. *Emberburn!* It was the DawnClan warrior who had talked to her at the Gathering!

She opened her eyes to find herself in a starry clearing and so many sweet scents filled her nose, nearly overwhelming. She must've fallen asleep and she looked around, searching for some cat. A cat approached her, their thick starry tortoiseshell and cream pelt rippling with muscle. Their yellow eyes were warm and gentle as they approached.

"Hello, Lilyrose," purred the cat, who was a she-cat by the sound of her voice. "My name is Dapplefern, and I wanted to speak with you." Dapplefern swished her starry tail as she sat down, gesturing for Lilyrose to do the same. When they both were sitting, the StarClan she-cat began to speak. "There's something you need to know, and it will affect the four Clans as a whole."

"Dapplefern," a voice cut in and Lilyrose looked over to see a gray speckled tom padding towards them. "You're being very vague

again." He meowed and flicked his yellow eyes to Lilyrose. "The OakClan medicine cat has better things to do than listen to your blabbering."

Lilyrose narrowed her eyes at the stranger, but he looked startlingly familiar. The powerfulness of his shoulders looked like her father's strong shoulders, Larkflight was always boasting about his strength. And his square-like ears looked more like her mother, Whiteblaze's ears.

The tom noticed her stare and commented tartly. "Never seen a tomcat before?" He grunted. Suddenly, his eyes raked over her and he sat down, his tail curled over his paws. "Lilyrose, don't you remember me? Goosewing?"

Lilyrose narrowed her eyes at the StarClan cat and shock rippled through her pelt as she realized this cat was her brother. "Goosewing!" She wanted to press herself into his fur, but Goosewing snapped at her.

"Now's not the time for recollection!" He growled with an angry flick of his ear. *I remember his death being announced at the Gathering,* she recalled, pained at his harsh tone. *Being killed by a fox is a death no cat should endure.* Guilt was clear in her brother's yellow gaze but Goosewing lashed his tail. "If Dapplefern won't tell you, I will. The Dark Forest is rising, Lilyrose, they've been training cats from all four Clans since before Nightstar joined them."

Lilyrose tipped her head to one side, confused. "What does that have to do with the fate of the Clans?" She asked tentatively. Her tail tip twitched back and forth as her littermate heaved a sigh.

"If the Dark Forest keeps training those from all the Clans," he meowed, his voice exasperated. "They'll grow to be too powerful, even more than StarClan."

The medicine cat gaped at the tom, eyes wide. "But nothing is stronger than StarClan!" She protested.

Dapplefern cast her a sympathetic glance. "That isn't true," she meowed. "The Dark Forest can easily overpower us if they crossed

that border." Her muzzle jerked to the far side of the large field where a blurred border protected the lush lands of StarClan from the dark, twisted trees of the Dark Forest. Lilyrose shuddered. "They've tried it once before, years ago, but they were quickly defeated by the ranks of StarClan. Now with those warriors long forgotten, those who walk in the shadows have been inching closer and closer to their goal of ridding the forest of any follower of StarClan."

Lilyrose's throat tightened at the thought of all the cats she loved and cared about suddenly vanishing. The thought alone made her stomach twist like a tree root. She shook her head and looked at Goosewing, her eyes stretched wide and pleading. "That can't happen!" She meowed, aware she was sounding like a kit throwing a fit. "What can I do to prevent the destruction of StarClan? Tell me what to do and I'll do it!"

Goosewing looked almost sympathetic as he flicked her cheek with his tail tip. "We can't tell you just yet," he told her. "But there is a line from a prophecy from long ago that may help."

Dapplefern flashed a worried look at the dead warrior, her eyes uncertain. "Are you sure we should tell her?" She asked hesitantly, glancing apologetically at Lilyrose. "The prophecy may not have any correlation to any of this."

The fur on Goosewing's starlit neck bristled. "Of course it correlates to this!" He snapped back, taking Lilyrose by surprise. He turned his attention to the far hills, where several cats were chasing each other. "The prophecy may be our only chance of surviving."

Lilyrose felt her patience starting to wear thin and she twitched her tail irritably. "Well?" She meowed sharply. "Are you going to tell me or what?"

Goosewing looked at her and nodded slowly, ignoring the protest from Dapplefern. "*Only the holly's fire, the growing moss, and burning of ember can destroy the night.*" He mewed and Lilyrose felt her head spin. Her brother touched his nose lightly to her head and everything around her started to spin. "Good luck, sister." He breathed.

"Lilyrose! Wake up!" Lilyrose's eyes snapped open and she looked up to see Meadowpaw standing over her, her eyes glowing with amusement in the dark gloom of the den. "Froststar's called a meeting."

Lilyrose scrambled to her paws and followed the warrior apprentice out of the den, a scrap of moss clung to her shoulder and she dislodged it quickly. "What's the meeting about?" She asked the apprentice, who she realized was a bit taller than her and had an air of pride and honor. "Is it your warrior naming ceremony?"

Meadowpaw puffed out her chest and nodded. "Hailpaw and I passed our assessments last night." She meowed and ducked under the vines hanging down from the mouth of the den.

Lilyrose felt mild surprise as she looked up at her leader, who was talking to her deputy, Goldenfire, with her back turned to the Clan. Her tail dangled from the Tall Tree, and she spotted Hailpaw staring up at the leader's tail tip with undisguised interest.

She's trying not to leap up and bat at it, she mused. *Despite it being several fox-lengths higher than she can jump.* Goldenfire was casting some glances at Lilyrose before continuing his conversation on the branch with Froststar.

"Hey, Lilyrose!" Her ears pricked as her attention got dragged away from the leader and deputy. She turned her head and saw her good friend Amberheart followed by Swiftsoul and Dawnflame. Amberheart butted her head against Lilyrose's and flicked her tail happily. "Come and sit with us, we want a back seat to see the entire ceremony."

Lilyrose looked at Swiftsoul and Dawnflame, surprised. "Don't you want to be the first ones to greet your kits?" She asked, blinking in confusion.

Dawnflame pressed against Swiftsoul's flank and blinked warmly at Lilyrose. "We'll be the first to call their new names," she replied, her voice thick with emotion. "We'll greet them when the crowd dies away."

Ah. Lilyrose dipped her head and followed the three towards the back of the ring of gathering warriors and settled down between Dawnflame and Amberheart and looked up at the Tall Tree as Goldenfire sat next to Frostar. His green eyes as speculative as ever as he gaze over the heads of his fellow Clanmates.

"Cats of OakClan," began Frostar. "Hailpaw and Meadowpaw have passed their warrior assessments last night and from what their mentors have told me, are ready to receive their warrior names." Her tabby head turned to rest on the mentors: Vixenpool and Graywolf. "Have your apprentices trained hard enough to earn the respect and honor of being a warrior?"

Vixenpool nodded. Lilyrose remembered when she was an apprentice, when Nightstar took over OakClan, she was leader. Vixenpool was a good leader, if not a little rusty and awkward, but good. It was horrible when Nightstar came in and swept Vixenpool off her leadership status and ruled OakClan, DawnClan, and NightClan as the leader. All of the other leaders were either killed, like Blackstar, or reverted back to their warrior positions while the deputies remained as such.

Graywolf spoke, snapping Lilyrose from her memories. "Meadowpaw is more than ready, Frostar." She meowed with a prideful glance at her apprentice, who straightened at her gaze.

Frostar bowed her head before throwing her head back and spoke loudly to the cloudy sky. "I, Frostar, leader of OakClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and I condemn them as warriors in turn." She looked down at the two apprentices and blinked at them. "Hailpaw and Meadowpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Hailfrost and Meadowheart. StarClan honors your duty and strength and we welcome you both as full members of OakClan."

"Hailfrost! Meadowheart!" Swiftsoul and Dawnflame exploded with pride while cheers erupted around them. Lilyrose stayed quiet and stared at her paws, deep in thought.

Now the Clan has two new warriors who may die in battle. She

shivered at the thought and glanced up as Swiftsoul and Dawnflame rose to their paws and headed for their kits. *All the time and effort put into training these cats will go to waste.*

Sighing, she rose heavily to her paws and padded toward her den without speaking to her friends or new warriors. The shadow in her den swallowed her in one gulp and she headed for her herb stores, making sure she had enough of everything.

"I need more marigold and dock," she meowed aloud to herself, shoulders sagging. Turning around, Lilyrose headed for the cave entrance and ducked outside. She padded toward the camp entrance when a voice stopped her.

"Lilyrose!" It was Froststar. She turned as the leader bounded towards her, eyes bright. She dipped her head as her leader approached her, tail flicking impatiently. "Where are you going?"

"Just going to fetch some dock and marigold," Lilyrose meowed, gesturing with a paw to the thorn tunnel. "Would you like to join me?"

Froststar's eyes glistened as she nodded. "Of course. Lead the way." She prompted and fell behind the medicine cat as they pushed their way out of the camp.

Lilyrose listened to the sounds of the leafbare-ridden forest as she and Froststar padded side-by-side. She tasted the air and sighed. No dock leaves would be in the immediate area, they had to go further into the forest.

"I heard Sedgepelt is expecting." Meowed Froststar as she looked at Lilyrose. "She didn't seem too thrilled."

"Yeah," replied the she-cat, her eyes peeled for marigold and dock. She spotted a small patch of greenery under a snowbank and bounded towards it. Cupping her paw, she pushed the cold powder away and grinned down at the green stalks of marigold. *There isn't much,* she thought as she leaned down to pick some. *When they regrow, it'll already be newleaf.*

Froststar flicked her ears. "I wonder if any of them will be interested in becoming your apprentice," she meowed, looking over at Lilyrose with curious blue eyes.

Lilyrose shrugged. "Maybe," her mew was muffled through the leaves as she led the way into the woods. *I hope. The work of a single medicine cat is a bit too overwhelming for one cat.* "Taste the air," she ordered over her shoulder. "Tell me if you can smell something tangy."

Froststar frowned quizically at her but obeyed. Raising her nose to the sky, she sniffed for a long moment before shaking her head. "Nothing."

Disappointment clawed Lilyrose's heart as her tail drooped. *I guess I'll have to hunt for dock later.* She thought dreadfully, turning back to her leader. "Let's head back to the camp," she meowed through her bundle of herbs. "I don't want anything to happen while we're not there."

Froststar nodded and dipped her head. "Good idea." Flicking her tail, the leader waited for Lilyrose to catch up before padding alongside her in the direction of the camp.

Chapter Eleven

Lilyrose sighed as she pushed a few tansy leaves toward Vixenpool, who was coughing hard in her nest. "Eat these," she meowed encouragingly. "They'll help with your cough."

Vixenpool opened her eyes and looked at the herbs. Reaching forward with her muzzle, she lapped up the tansy and sank back into her nest with a sigh. "Thank you, Lilyrose." She rasped. "You're too good to me."

Lilyrose touched her nose to the senior warrior's forehead gently. She could feel the heat pulsing from her skin and she resisted the urge to wail aloud. *She's got a bad fever!* "It's what I do," she managed to say. "I'll bring you some honey for your throat and a poppy seed to help you sleep."

Before she could make it to her herb store, Vixenpool protested. "Don't bother," the senior warrior's voice was rattling and hoarse as Lilyrose turned around. "Don't waste your herbs on me when you can use them on a much younger cat." As she finished, she started coughing hard again.

Uncertainty settled like a cloud in Lilyrose's belly as she headed into her herb stores and found the last bit of honey. Holding the honeycomb in one paw, she looked over her shoulder at Vixenpool, who was shivering in her nest. She turned away from the sickly warrior and sighed. *What should I do?* She wondered. *I've got a precious amount of catmint left. If I give it to Vixenpool, what if another cat falls ill with greencough or whitecough? Will saving Vixenpool kill another cat?* Sighing, she took another leaf of tansy, the honeycomb, and a poppy seed and headed back to the she-cat. After watching the red-and-white warrior take the herbs, Lilyrose ducked out of the den.

A new blanket of snow crunched under her paws as she trudged toward the leader's den. She knew Froststar would trying to keep warm and healthy, away from the rest of her Clanmates. Goldenfire

would do the same, but his pride clouded his judgment of falling ill. "Froststar?" She called, slipping into the cave.

"Lilyrose?" The crackling voice of her leader made her flatten her ears in fear. "What is it? Are you out of herbs?" Froststar broke off to cough before going on. "If so, I'll have Goldenfire send out a patrol or two to look for more."

Lilyrose cringed as she neared her leader, seeing her streaming eyes and running nose. Her heart froze in her chest as she saw clumps of fur on the stone floor. "No, my herbs stores are good." She meowed, trying to push past her feelings of unease. "I'm a little low on honey and tansy, but I'll find some more." Her gaze flitted over her leader's crouched form. "Are you okay, Froststar?"

Her leader nodded, trying to hide her coughing by clearing her throat, which only made her cough more. "I'll be just fine," she rasped. "Just a little tickle in my throat is all." Her eyes were strangely cloudy and Lilyrose flicked her tail nervously.

"I'll go into the forest and see if there's any tansy," Lilyrose told Froststar, desperate to get away from the sick leader. "If there isn't any, can I see if Shellfur has any to spare?"

Froststar nodded. "Send my regards to Pebblestar for Goosewing's death," she meowed and Lilyrose dipped her head. "Be back before sunset."

"Yes, Froststar," the medicine cat mewed respectfully and slipped out of the den. Raising her head, she called across the clearing. "Dawnflame!"

The cream-tabby dropped the two scrawny mice she was carrying and looked over. "Yeah?" She meowed, tail tip twitching.

Lilyrose padded up to her, her tail high and kinked. "Want to come with me to the DawnClan camp?" She offered and watched her friend's eyes widen. "I'm going to see if Shellfur has any tansy if there's none in the forest." She explained.

Dawnflame's eyes brightened. "Sure!" She meowed enthusiastically.

Turning her head, she meowed. "Can Swiftsoul and Amberheart come?"

Lilyrose nodded. "We can't have too many cats or else we'll startle the DawnClan cats," she warned her friend.

Dawnflame looked playfully over at her and winked. "If we startle them, then they can throw snow at us until we retreat over the border." She purred and Lilyrose joined in. "I'll get the others and we'll head out. Meet us at the camp entrance."

Lilyrose nodded and headed for the thorn entrance and sat down to wait for her friends. She looked up as a snowflake landed on her nose and sneezed. *Looks like nothing but snow is coming,* she shuddered, but not from the cold. *Snow brings cold, which brings more sick cats, which brings death.*

"What's this about you going to DawnClan?" Goldenfire's voice jolted her out of her thoughts and she looked at the deputy. Concern and worry ringed his green eyes as he blinked at her. "Is everything okay?"

Lilyrose couldn't help but feel warmed by the tom's fretfulness and nodded. "Everything's fine," she soothed. "I'm a little low on tansy and honey. If I can't find any in the forest, I'll go to DawnClan to ask Shellfur for some."

"I should go with you," Goldenfire meowed once she finished. "I'll tell Blueheart to send out patrols while I'm gone-"

Lilyrose cut him off. "I'll be fine." She meowed firmly and saw Amberheart and Swiftsoul emerging from the warrior's den with Dawnflame. "Besides," she added, "I'll have Dawnflame, Swiftsoul, and Amberheart with me."

Goldenfire's fur rose as the other three warriors trotted up to them. He turned to Amberheart, eyes burning. "You're going with her?" He demanded, fear trickling into every word.

Amberheart blinked at him in surprise before her eyes hardened. "Yes, I am." She growled, her tail lashing. "Dawnflame invited us

and we're going. Whether you like it or not."

Goldenfire flattened his ears to his head. "What if a DawnClan patrol attacks you?" He fretted. "You'll get ripped to shreds!"

"For StarClan's sake, Goldenfire!" Amberheart snapped, sounding annoyed and irritated. "I'm not a kit! I can handle myself!"

Goldenfire unsheathed his claws and worked them into the snow. Lilyrose gulped, looking between the two siblings. "I already lost Appleclaw and Snowfrost, I'm *not* going to lose you as well." Sternly, he added. "You're not going with them."

Amberheart bared her teeth, anger smoldering in her green eyes. "I'm a senior warrior, Goldenfire!" She shouted. "Appleclaw left and Snowfrost went with her! Stop acting like a mother and let me do this!" Her claws glittered in the frosty sunlight as she shoved past him. "Come on, Lilyrose, we're leaving."

Lilyrose watched her push through the tunnel and looked apologetically at Goldenfire as the others followed the furious she-cat. "I'll talk to her," she promised before bounding after them. "Wait for me!" Lilyrose caught up to Dawnflame's side and looked at Amberheart, who was fuming.

"He can't coddle me forever!" She growled, her tail lashing to and fro. "What if I join Iceleaf in the elder's den? Will he insist I have six guards at once?"

Swiftsoul glanced sideways at his mate and licked her cheek. "He's your brother, Amberheart." He reminded her gently. "He lost Appleclaw and Snowfrost already. He doesn't want to lose you too."

Amberheart lashed her tail, neck fur bristling. "He shouldn't meddle in my business to begin with." She growled bitterly and shook her head, looking at Lilyrose. "What are we looking for again?"

"Tansy and honey." Dawnflame meowed before Lilyrose could. The warrior cast her an apologetic look before flicking her eyes forward. "What's tansy look like?"

Lilyrose pictured the plant in her mind and cursed. "It grows near

Twolegplace," she meowed and looked at her friends, who screwed up their noses.

"We'll have to go through DawnClan territory to get there," groaned Swiftsoul as he looked at the sky. Clouds covered the vast blue area. "Looks like leafbare is going to say hi again."

"Then we'd better hurry," urged Amberheart as she looked over at Lilyrose. "We can ask Shellfur if he has both honey and tansy. And if he has both, we'll take some of it."

Lilyrose nodded and picked up the pace to a trot as fear clouded her head. *What if he has no tansy? What will I do then? Reedfrost, why did you have to leave?*

One of her mentors had left with a number of other Clan cats in fear that another cat like Nightstar would arise and do more damage than the dark she-cat herself. In a haste to leave, Reedfrost gave her her full name and left along with Appleclaw, Snowfrost, Larkflight, Toadpad, Mistyflake, Rosespring, Bravebranch, and several others. Her second mentor, Shellfur, had returned back to his Clan and she only saw him during their half-moon Moonpool Gatherings.

She hadn't realized they reached the border when a cat hissed, snapping her out of her thoughts. Looking up, Lilyrose saw Stoneblaze, Gingerheart, and Firestep, along with three unknown cats.

"What are you doing here?" Snarled Stoneblaze, his tail lashing as he glared at Lilyrose. "You're a medicine cat, not a warrior who patrols borders."

"Yeah," sneered Gingerheart as he slid out his claws. "Should we bow down and let you pass? OakClan seems to think they own everything anyway."

The fur on Swiftsoul's shoulders started to bristle and he hissed. "Maybe I'll teach you a lesson about what defeat tastes like." He bared his teeth and unsheathed his claws.

Lilyrose shoved the black-and-white spotted tom back, sending him

a warning look. "We're here for their help," she muttered in his ear when he looked ready to protest. Turning around, she looked at the enemy warriors. *I'm a medicine cat,* she thought to herself, trying to stop herself from trembling. *I live outside Clan rivalries.* "We need to speak with Shellfur." She managed.

"What's going on?" A familiar voice rang through the trees and Lilyrose saw tortoiseshell fur bound towards them, skidding to a halt beside Stoneblaze. Emberburn's purple gaze rested on her and she felt something inside her flutter. *Keep it together.* "Why are you here?" His tone was harsh as he looked at Lilyrose, his eyes narrowed.

She tried her best not to look hurt by his voice as she meowed. "W-we need to speak with Shellfur," she repeated.

Emberburn stared at her for a moment more before looking at her friends. "What do they need with our medicine cat?" He meowed, looking back at Lilyrose.

"They came with me," she explained quickly before her friends leaped at the DawnClan patrol. "There were some foxes scented in the area, so they came with me."

Emberburn looked at his Clanmates before sighing. "Fine," he meowed tightly. "Come with us and we'll take you to the camp."

A rusty ginger she-cat looked sharply at the tom. "Are you serious?" She snorted. "Letting OakClan cats into our camp without asking further?" Turning back to the four OakClanners, she added with a threatening snarl. "We should rip their fur off for even *thinking* about coming into our home!"

"Enough, Bumblepaw," Emberburn growled and looked at the rest of the warriors. "Stoneblaze, you tell Pebblestar that the OakClan medicine cat is here. Boulderpaw, let Shellfur and Splashpaw know Lilyrose is coming."

Firestep looked at the tortoiseshell warrior, eyes narrowed into slits. "What about us?" He prompted, casting a mistrustful looked at the OakClan cats.

"We'll escort them to the camp," Emberburn replied and padded to Lilyrose's side, nudging her forward. "Come."

Lilyrose felt her heart thud in her chest as she padded alongside the DawnClan warrior. Her breath came in shallow gasps and she forced herself not to look at the warrior too long. *What is happening to me?* She struggled to speak casually. "H-how is everything in DawnClan?" She whispered.

Emberburn twitched his ear at her but didn't look at her. "Fine," he meowed simply. "There's been a new batch of kits this moon, which is good."

Disappointment dropped like a stone in her belly and she faked a smile. "How many kits are there?" She meowed, forcing her tone to be light and cheerful.

"Eleven, as of now." The tom replied, his voice tight.

"That's a pawful of kits," she joked, bumping her flank against his. Emberburn glanced sharply at her and she cleared her throat awkwardly. "I mean, they'll be pawfuls as apprentices."

Emberburn didn't reply with words, but with a grunt. They walked in silence for what seemed like moons until Lilyrose saw the familiar green brambles of DawnClan's camp walls. Her chest tightened with fear as she recalled Nightstar's death. The leader had been cornered by her Clan, led by her kits, and ripped to shreds. Hollyfire, Mosspelt, and Emberburn had never looked so broken after her body was buried under a sycamore tree far from Clan territory.

Swiftsoul padded up to her left side and licked her ear comfortingly. "Don't worry," he whispered. "We've got your back in case something happens."

"That's not what I'm afraid of," Lilyrose murmured and ducked her head as they went through the gorse hole in the brambles. Thorns ripped at her pelt but she hardly felt it as the eyes of those in the camp were turned to her and her friends.

A yellow tabby tom with robin-egg blue eyes padded towards them, stopping at the middle of the clearing with a red, brown, and white tabby calico she-cat at his side. "Lilyrose," Pebblestar respectfully dipped his head to the medicine cat, his tone curious and slightly wary. "What brings you to our humble abode?"

Lilyrose forced her fur to lie flat as she ducked her head to the DawnClan leader. He was fairly young to become a leader, but his warriors seemed to respect him more than Nightstar. "I need to speak with Shellfur," she explained. "I'm nearly out of tansy, and the patch where they grow isn't ready for picking yet."

Murmurs of disbelief buzzed around the clearing as a cherry-red tabby she-cat spoke up, her face and body scarred. "What kind of mouse-dung is that?" She snorted. "A medicine cat who can't find enough herbs?"

A dark-gray tabby tom glared at the OakClan cats. "Why should we believe the words of a cat who is barely old enough to be a warrior?"

Lilyrose flinched as more and more insults were thrown at her, and she shrank beneath her pelt. Her ears flattened to her head and she pressed against Swiftsoul, who quickly licked between her ears.

It was Amberheart who snarled at the DawnClan warriors. "Do you doubt a cat who speaks with StarClan?" She challenged, her fur fluffing out to twice its size. "Do you treat Shellfur the same way you're treating Lilyrose?"

"They most certainly do not, Amberheart." Rumbled a rather pleasant voice as Shellfur emerged from his cave, a dark blue swirled tabby she-cat beside him. The older medicine cat swiftly looked around at his Clanmates. "And they should not be saying such foul things about a medicine cat." He added sternly.

The cherry tabby she-cat sniffed indignantly and spun around, stalking into the den behind her. The dark gray tom glared back at the tom, but didn't say anything in his defense.

Shellfur looked at the dark tabby for a moment longer before

resting his friendly green gaze on Lilyrose. "My ears were buzzing, did you say something about not having enough tansy?" He meowed.

Relief crashed over Lilyrose and she nodded, feeling much better than the spotted tom liked her more than the warriors in his Clan. "Yes," she replied calmly as she relaxed her tense shoulders.

"I think we may have some to spare." Shellfur turned to the blue tabby she-cat. "Check the tansy stock and see if we can give some to Lilyrose." He told the smaller cat, his tail tip twitching back and forth. "Be quick- a cat's life may depend on it."

"Yes, Shellfur." The apprentice-looking she-cat meowed and bounded back into the den.

"Is that your apprentice?" Dawnflame asked, looking at where the tabby had disappeared.

Shellfur let out a small purr and nodded, his whiskers twitching. "I was hoping to introduce her to you at the next Moonpool meeting," he meowed to Lilyrose. "But Splashpaw is one of the best helpers I've had." He winked at Lilyrose and pricked his ears as Splashpaw came back with a mouthful of tansy. "Good. Now, give it to Lilyrose." He instructed.

Splashpaw nodded and carefully approached the OakClan medicine cat, as though she were afraid Lilyrose would tell her Clanmates to attack the tiny cat. "Here," meowed the apprentice as she gave Lilyrose the bundle. "Is that enough?"

Lilyrose nodded, excitement sparking in her paws. "It'll last until the tansy grows back later," she mumbled through the stalks. "Thank you, Shellfur."

Shellfur waved his tail and blinked warmly at her. "Of course," he purred and looked at Pebblestar. "Is that all?"

Pebblestar nodded stiffly to his medicine cat. "Emberburn, Adderseed, and Branchstripe will escort these OakClan cats back to the border." He ordered.

The dark gray tabby tom sprang to his paws, fur bristling. "Do you have bees in your brain, Pebblestar?" The tom exclaimed, eyes wide with outrage. "These cats are our enemies, not guests! Let them find their way home by themselves!"

Pebblestar glared at the warrior and lashed his tail. "With all due respect, Adderseed, but are you arguing with your Clan leader?" He asked coolly, though his eyes were blazing with blue fire.

Adderseed met his leader's gaze, fur bristling. "Yes, I am." He spat back and Lilyrose couldn't help but gasp. "Have you forgotten that OakClan fostered and raised Nightstar? We shouldn't show kindness to a Clan who brought up a killer!"

Beside her, Emberburn bristled with indignation and he opened his jaws to retort when a hiss came from the DawnClan cats. It was a she-cat, Hollyfire, to be exact.

"Shut your jaws, Adderseed!" The she-cat snarled and stalked to her Clanmate, coming nose-to-nose with the tom. Around her, those who were standing close to the warrior took a few paces back, their eyes wide. "Have *you* forgotten your father, Clearstar, *allowed* Nightstar into the Clan and made her his deputy?"

A mew of protest came from a pale tabby she-cat, but she was silenced by a golden-brown tabby she-cat.

Adderseed's neck fur stood up as he curled his lip into the start of a snarl. "My father was a better leader than any cat could ever be." He snapped, his claws unsheathing as he squared up to the she-cat. "What about your father, huh? Oh, wait, your father died and left you and your half-breed siblings to rot in here!"

Hollyfire let out a yowl of anger and sprang at the tom, claws outstretched. Adderseed was taken by surprise as she battered his face and ears.

"Stop them!" Cried a snowy she-cat where she was standing over a small black-and-white-splotched tom, who watched with wide, anxious eyes.

Pebblestar flicked his tail as he watched, blue eyes filled with interest. "Wait," he ordered back the two warriors who advanced to break apart the tussling cats.

Lilyrose gulped as Hollyfire ripped at Adderseed's tabby pelt, tearing clump after clump of the tom's fur. The pair were screeching and spitting as they clawed at each other.

Adderseed reared on his hind legs and slashed at Hollyfire's face, eyes ablaze. "You should never have been born!" He yowled, sounding crazed. "All of your littermates!"

Emberburn let out a roar of rage and darted for the warrior, claws extended. "Take that back!" He snarled and lunged for Adderseed, but was stopped by Shellfur.

"Enough of this!" The medicine cat snapped, glaring at the two fighting warriors. "Split them apart before they rip each other apart." He ordered, looking sharply at Petaltail, the Clan deputy, and Stoneblaze, a senior warrior.

The two cats acted quickly and tore the two fighting cats apart. Hollyfire writhed as Petaltail pulled her tail, dragging her away from Adderseed, hissing and spitting. Stoneblaze sank his teeth into Adderseed's scruff and twisted his head around, yanking his Clanmate away.

"Does this happen often?" Lilyrose whispered to Swiftsoul, who didn't reply as he watched. Gulping, she set the tansy down and looked at Shellfur, who was glaring at Pebblestar, trembling with apprehension.

"Why didn't you stop them?" He demanded furiously. Pebblestar blinked and looked down at his medicine cat, eyes confused. "They would've torn each other apart!"

Pebblestar flicked his tail at the medicine cat and turned his attention to the OakClan cats, who were frozen in place. Even Amberheart was speechless from what they'd just witnessed. "Escort them out of here," he ordered, his voice void of emotion.

Emberburn immediately turned and bounded toward Lilyrose. "Get your herbs and let's leave," he muttered, casting a glance over his shoulder at Hollyfire and Adderseed as they were guided to Shellfur's den. "Branchstripe, let's go." He called and the dark tabby warrior bounded up to them.

Lilyrose bent over and scooped up the tansy before hastily following the two DawnClan warriors. Her thoughts whirled as she fell into step between Swiftsoul and Emberburn. None of the cats were speaking and only the crunch of snow beneath their paws broke the tense silence between them.

I've only seen cats fight amongst each other when Nightstar was leading. She thought with a shudder. *Even then, it ended with at least one cat losing their life.*

"You four go on ahead." Emberburn's voice sliced through her memories of unsheathed claws, screeching, and death. "I need to speak with Lilyrose."

Dawnflame sent a wary look over at Lilyrose, a silent question in her eyes. *Should we trust him alone with you?* When the medicine cat nodded, Dawnflame hesitated before nudging Swiftsoul and Amberheart onward after Branchstripe.

Lilyrose dropped the tansy at her paws and faced the DawnClan warrior. "What?" She meowed impatiently. "Do you have a thorn in your paw?"

Emberburn shook his head and sat down, curling his tail over his paws. "I needed to speak with you after the Gathering," he said. "But you disappeared before I could."

"I needed to follow my Clanmates," she pointed out, her voice rising. Seeing the almost soft look in his eye, Lilyrose sighed in defeat. "What is it?" Through her feelings of wariness, she couldn't help but feel awkward when talking to the handsome tortoiseshell tom. She felt her shoulders relax, causing her to suddenly feel uncomfortable.

Emberburn hesitated. "Well, I've been having this dream of being in

the Place of No Stars." Before he could go on, Lilyrose cut in, her voice sharp.

"The Dark Forest?" She meowed, her tail starting to lash back and forth. Suddenly, she didn't know if she could trust the purple-eyed warrior. *Is he training with his mother?*

"I haven't been training with any cat if that's what you're thinking about." Emberburn meowed, eyes narrowed. "But, I know two of DawnClan's apprentices have been training there."

Lilyrose stiffened in shock. The wind, just a chilly breeze, seemed to howl in her ears. It deafened her as she stared numbly at the warrior. She struggled to find her voice. "What do you expect me to do?" Her words were harsher than she intended and Emberburn drew himself up in response. "I'm OakClan's medicine cat. Not a cat who fights against the forces of bloodthirsty cats. I don't know what you want me to do but I have to get back home." Reaching down, she grasped the cold tansy leave between her jaws and started to leave before Emberburn put a paw in front of her chest and stopped her.

Emberburn looked at her, eyes burning with a silent plea. "Please, Lilyrose." He meowed, his voice growing low and gruff. "Meet with me in a quarter-moon at the Gathering Hollow. Maybe then I'll know more."

Lilyrose felt her heart pound in her chest as she shook her head and bounded across the border, trying to get quickly back to camp. Her ears burned despite the cold as snow began to fall. Her mind was fogged as she slid under the thorns, barely feeling them raking against her back. As she headed to her den, a cat emerged, their head bowed and ears flat to their head.

Lilyrose realized this cat was Redstripe and she felt dread claw at her chest. *What's happened? Are more cats sick?* Picking up the pace, she strode to the tom's side and nudged him. "What's the matter?" She meowed, her voice muffled by tansy.

Redstripe lifted his head, eyes clouded with grief. "I-I went to give Vixenpool some prey." He croaked, his voice hoarse with sadness.

"When I saw her sleeping, I tried to wake her but she was as cold as ice. Lilyrose, I-I think Vixenpool's dead."

Chapter Twelve

Lilyrose felt numb as she padded into the warrior's den, searching for her friends. They'd sat vigil for Vixenpool the previous night and Lilyrose felt both exhausted and dull. She sulked around the camp while her Clanmates bustled around her as though they'd already moved on from Vixenpool's untimely death. *I should have given her the rest of the tansy.* Guilt clawed at her heart as she poked her head into the den. "Hello?"

"Is that you, Lilyrose?" Goldenfire's voice hit her like a blow and she was tempted to run into her den to hide. His green eyes gleamed in the gloom as he rose to his paws and padded towards her. "Are you alright?"

Lilyrose's legs trembled as the tom neared and she fell against him, raising her voice to a grief-filled caterwaul. "I'm so sorry, Vixenpool!" She cried.

Goldenfire curled around her, licking her head gently as she sobbed. "It's okay," he whispered as he smoothed her ruffled fur. "Vixenpool's death is not your fault. StarClan wanted her and you did all that you could to save her."

Lilyrose trembled against the deputy, trying to regain her composure. She pressed against the tom as he flicked his tail around her and lapped at her fur. "I should've done more," she whispered.

"There's nothing more you could have done." While her head knew he was right, her heart was as stubborn as a boulder and wouldn't budge. "It isn't your fault that the herb stores were low. After all, leafbare doesn't provide the medicine cats with many herbs this time of year."

Lilyrose sniffled and huddled against the deputy, tears staining her cheeks as she tried to stop the tears from coming. She hadn't realized her tail was curled around Goldenfire's until she tried to

stand up. Awkwardly, she untwined her tail and Goldenfire quickly scrambled to his paws. "Sorry." She muttered.

"It's alright," Goldenfire responded and smoothed his shoulder fur. Turning his head, he gazed outside the den. "Come on; we should get some prey."

Lilyrose followed the deputy as she stumbled out of the warrior's den into the camp clearing. Her belly felt empty as she felt heads turn to stare in her direction. She pressed against Goldenfire and felt his tail rest across her shoulders comfortingly.

"Lilyrose!" The she-cat glanced up as she saw Froststar trotting up to her and Goldenfire. The Clan deputy glanced apologetically at her out of the corner of his eye before dipping his head to Froststar and padding away.

"Yes, Froststar?" She forced herself to meet her leader's gaze, which was authoritative and wistful. *Perhaps she misses Vixenpool more than I thought. Then again, I've never seen her and Vixenpool talk before.* "What do you need?"

The brown tabby leader dipped her head to her and led her to the leader's den. Lilyrose hesitated before following and slipped inside the shadowed den, ears flat against her head. "I've been meaning to speak with you about something." Froststar stopped near the back of the den and settled herself into her nest of feathers and moss. "I had wanted to wait until it was the right time, but with leafbare here, I didn't know how to tell you."

Lilyrose felt her heart thud in her chest as she nodded, silently wishing she could leave. Her paws itched to carry her across the territory and border and into the DawnClan camp where Emberburn was. She quickly shot her anticipation of meeting the tom and looked at Froststar. "What is it?"

Her leader flicked her gaze up and down her and finally spoke. "I'm expecting kits."

The news hit Lilyrose like a tidal wave crashing over a peaceful sandy beach. She gawked at her leader for a heartbeat before

speaking. "Who is the father?" She asked.

"Redstripe," replied Froststar as her tail swished behind her. Lilyrose stared at her in amazement. She hadn't noticed her growing flanks and clumsiness at all. "I'm not that far along, but I know it's been at least a quarter moon."

"How can you tell?" Lilyrose questioned in surprise.

Froststar laughed airily. "I've had a few litters of kits in my time. Won't be the first time I've given new warriors to the Clan." She rested her frosty eyes on Lilyrose, her smile twisting into a concerned frown. "Are you alright?" She meowed, her voice suddenly serious.

Lilyrose swallowed back a wail in her throat and forced herself to nod. "Just a bit tired," she lied and rose to her paws. "May I leave?" Before Froststar could reply, Lilyrose had already turned around and headed for the den entrance. Pushing through the vines that grew from the tree above the den, she sighed and headed for her den. She knew she needed to find more herbs before leafbare killed them but she couldn't muster the energy to leave the camp.

"Watch out!" Hissed a voice and she looked up sharply as she nearly crashed into Songscratch. Her eyes narrowed warily at the light brown tabby tom as he grumbled about cats not looking where they were going before stalking away.

Songscratch was Reedfrost and Dawnflame's brother, one of the last descendants of Gorsewhisper and Voletuft, two mates that either were killed by Nightstar herself or by a cruel cat by the name of Rowantail. From the stories told by the queens and elders when she was in the nursery, Rowantail was a dark ginger tom with yellow eyes and killed Deerstripe, an elder of OakClan when Nightstar was born. He killed her on accident, but Nightstar never forgot what he did to poor Deerstripe. One day, when training Goldenfire, Goldenpaw at the time, Rowantail ambushed them and killed Gorsewhisper when Goldenpaw had gone back to camp for backup. When Nightstar was exiled and joined DawnClan, Rowantail attacked and was killed after pointing out that Nightstar was expecting Thorntail, her mate's kits.

Lilyrose padded into her den and headed for her nest, flopping on the moss with a sigh. *Froststar and Sedgepelt are expecting kits,* she thought gloomily as she looked across her den to the nest Vixenpool died in. *Vixenpool is gone, Emberburn goes to the Dark Forest doing StarClan-knows-what, and I don't have anything to offer to my Clanmates.* She closed her eyes, hoping for sleep. When it didn't come, she stared blankly at the stone wall.

***

"Keep your weight off it and rest for about a day," Lilyrose told Meadowheart as she pulled another thorn out of her pad. Her tone was emotionless as she addressed the warrior. "You'll be fine."

Meadowheart got up and dipped her head unsteadily to the medicine cat. "Thanks as always, Lilyrose." She meowed gratefully before hobbling out of the den.

"Check on Owlflight!" Lilyrose called half-heartedly after her. "He said he'd bring me some more comfrey for Iceleaf!" The white elder had wrenched her shoulder whilst helping the warriors reinforce the nursery when a snowstorm blew some leaves and bramble away. Turning away from the den entrance, she cleaned up the marigold and cobwebs and looked at her herb stock.

Since Vixenpool's death over a half-moon ago, Lilyrose hardly left the camp to search for herbs in case a cat fell ill suddenly and needed her. Sedgepelt and Froststar were moved into the nursery and Redstripe visited his mate every single day to check on her, talk to her, or bring prey. Sedgepelt was often visited by her friend, Wildwing, who would tell her all about the daily patrols and hunts.

Lilyrose let out a defeated sigh and shifted in her nest, feeling something stab her in the right flank. Hissing in pain, she sat up and opened her eyes. She wasn't in her den anymore but in a forest full of dead trees and fog. *The Dark Forest.* Her heart skipped a beat as she watched a shape approach her and she turned tail and fled.

She wove through the twisted trees, adrenaline flooding through her as she tried to get away from the mysterious cat. Leaping over a

boulder, her paw nearly got caught on a root sticking out of the ground and she stumbled but kept running.

"Stop!" A booming voice caused her to skid to a halt, claws sliding out as a starry cat appeared. Lilyrose tensed as scrabbling came from behind her and she spun around to see a tortoiseshell she-cat with teal eyes. "Leave her be, Patchpelt. You have nothing to do with OakClan's medicine cat."

Lilyrose glanced at the starry figure and watched the black-furred cat arch his back at the tortoiseshell she-cat. "You need to leave." He ordered, his voice harsh and threatening. "You are too close to the border. Turn back or face the consequences."

Patchpelt snorted. "She wandered too far into the Place of No Stars, Blackheart." She glared at the starry tom. "It's my duty to chase off whomever I wish." Pointing her thin tail to Lilyrose, she added tersely. "Especially one who is a follower of StarClan."

Defiance sparked in her paws at the disgust in the Dark Forest she-cat's tone as she said 'StarClan'. Drawing herself up, Lilyrose glowered at Patchpelt. "There are many cats who follow StarClan," she retorted and raised her chin.

Patchpelt leered at her, eyes taunting slits. "And I suppose you're a medicine cat?" She snickered, her tail twisting behind her like a root. "You don't look like a warrior that can take on even the smallest kit!"

Blackheart took a pace between the medicine cat and the dark warrior, eyes irritated. "Keep your whiskers in check, Patchpelt and we'll do the same." He growled and Lilyrose saw his claws glinting in the gloom.

Patchpelt bared her teeth but backed off, glaring from the StarClan tom to the medicine cat. "This won't happen again, Blackheart." She hissed threateningly. "The next cat to step their paw in my territory won't be saved by you. No matter if you watch or not." With a final grunt, the she-cat swung her head around and stalked into the twisted trees.

Lilyrose sighed in relief as she left and turned to the starry tom, her heart thundering in her chest. "Thank you-"

Blackheart spun around to face her, eyes lit with anger. "What are you doing here?" He snapped, startling the she-cat. Her fur prickled as she saw the flame in his yellow eyes.

"W-what?" She spluttered, astonished.

"You heard what I said," he growled angrily. "Why were you in the Dark Forest?"

She'd never seen a StarClan cat so angry and took a step back, alarmed. "I didn't *want* to be there," she defended herself. Why was he asking her about something she couldn't control? "I merely went to sleep in my nest and showed up there."

Blackheart studied her for a moment before jerking his muzzle to a blurred border. On the other side of the border was a lush forest mixed with meadows full of life. Taking a wary step toward the blur, Lilyrose saw cats all over the place and it took her breath away. "Come on." The black tabby tom leaped over the blurred border in a single bound and impatiently waited on the other side. "There's someone who needs to talk to you."

Curious, Lilyrose cleared the border and followed him as he led the way into a meadow, heading for a group of large stones where some cats were lounging on. Her ears flicked forward as she examined the cats. They all looked strong, muscular, and fit. There was a red-brown tabby she-cat, a large, fluffy white tom, a night-black tom, and a pale-ginger she-cat.

"Who are they?" Lilyrose asked Blackheart as they padded towards them. "Are they medicine cats?"

Blackheart shook his triangular tabby head. "They are the Clan founders," he replied. *The Clan founders!* Lilyrose hazily remembered the tale of Oak Leaf, Glacier Peak, Night Sky, and Dawn Blaze from her time in the nursery. They were members of the ancient Tribe of Falling Feathers and left when there was no

more prey where they lived and went to the Clan's current home by the lake.

The oak-brown she-cat lifted her small head and nudged the white tom next to her. "We have visitors," she purred and jerked her muzzle to Blackheart and Lilyrose.

The large white tom sat up and dipped his head to Blackheart. "Hello," he purred and looked at Lilyrose. "Who are you, little one?" He asked kindly.

"This is Lilyrose, Glacierstar." Blackheart bowed his head to the ancient leader and Lilyrose did the same. "She is OakClan's current medicine cat." He beckoned Lilyrose forward with his tail and she nervously stepped toward the four cats.

The oak-brown she-cat rose to her paws and leaped down the rock she was perched on and padded softly towards her. Lilyrose was shocked at how small the tabby was, having to crouch down to meet her eye-to-eye. "My name is Oakstar," purred the small leader. "I'm honored to learn that you are my Clan's medicine cat, Lilyrose."

Lilyrose felt her throat tighten and she could hardly breathe. These cats created the Clans and she was meeting them! As she stared at Oakstar, she eventually found her voice. "The honor is all mine," she croaked and looked at the other leaders. "I'm shocked to meet all of you."

The large tom, Glacierstar, dipped his head to her humbly. "The pleasure's all ours," he mewed and straightened. "I'm Glacierstar, you've met Oakstar, and this is Nightstar and Dawnstar." He nodded to the black tom and pale-ginger she-cat.

"Hello," Nightstar meowed politely with a swift dip of his broad head. He sat up and glanced at Blackheart, his tail twitching.

Dawnstar simply waved her tail at Lilyrose and looked at Nightstar. "What is it you need, dear?" She asked warmly, looking back at Lilyrose with a flicker of amusement in her yellow eyes.

Blackheart looked flustered. "I brought Lilyrose here after saving

her from being killed by Patchpelt." He reported and glanced over at Lilyrose.

Glacierstar looked surprised and Oakstar stared at Lilyrose, making her uncomfortable. "The Dark Forest?" The white leader sounded astonished. "Why were you there?"

Oakstar met Lilyrose's gaze gently. "I don't think she wanted to be there," she meowed softly and shot Glacierstar a look. "After all, only horrid cats go there."

Dawnstar flicked her tail as though asking for permission to speak. Rising to her paws, she jumped off the rock she was laying on with Nightstar and strode to Lilyrose's side. "She's a medicine cat," her voice is firm and stern as she rested her yellow eyes on her fellow leaders. "She would never go there to be with those traitors to the warrior code and StarClan."

Lilyrose said nothing but felt Blackheart stiffen beside her. Casting him a confused look, she couldn't read his expression and wished she could read his mind.

His yellow eyes sparkled as he spoke, his voice tight. "Not all cats who break the code go to the Dark Forest, Dawnstar." He pointed out, his shoulder fur bristling.

Nightstar nodded and looked sympathetically at the tom. "We know that, Blackheart," he agreed. Turning to Lilyrose, he added. "Although both the medicine cat code and warrior code have been altered, it's been stretched too an extent that doesn't overstep boundaries."

"Nightstar's right," Oakstar conceded. "Every cat breaks the codes at some point. Even if they don't mean it." She chuckled. "Even the most devout followers of StarClan break the code."

Blackheart cut in with a whisk of his tail. "Lilyrose needs to wake up sometime," he reminded the ancient leaders.

Glacierstar responded coolly. "Then why don't we get this over with quickly." His tone wasn't insulting, but breezy. He rose to his paws

and took a few paces toward Lilyrose and towered over her. "The Dark Forest grows in numbers ever moon," he told her. "With cats from every Clan training with those who killed their fellow Clanmates to kit-killers, the Dark Forest may overpower StarClan soon."

Lilyrose couldn't help but burst in. "Nothing can overpower StarClan!"

Glacierstar flicked his tail over her mouth. "Follow your heart and help them. If the Dark Forest sweeps through the Clans, StarClan can do little to help." He touched his nose to her forehead and sighed. "Do your best, Lilyrose." He breathed and she closed her eyes.

"Lilyrose, wake up!" A frantic voice roused her from her sleep and she snapped her eyes open. It was Wildwing, his paws shaking her shoulders. "It-it's Sedgepelt. I think her kits are coming!"

Lilyrose scrambled to her paws and stared at the black tom. "Find Amberheart and Dawnflame," she ordered and made her way to her borage, camomile, and burnet. *Her kits are coming so early. They may not live.* She shuddered but spun around and followed Wildwing out of the cave.

It was moonhigh and snow was falling in thick flakes that peppered Lilyrose's thick dark-gray-and-white pelt. Wildwing looked fearful as he looked over at her.

"Will she be okay?" He asked, his voice anxious as he led her to the nursery.

"I won't know until the kitting is done." Lilyrose slipped by the warrior and ducked into the nursery. Sedgepelt was writhing in pain, her jaws parted in agonized shrieks of pure distress. "It's okay, Sedgepelt." She soothed, resting a paw on her flank as she put her herbs to her right.

"What can we do?" Dawnflame's voice sounded behind Lilyrose as she and Amberheart burst into the den.

"Get a stick," Lilyrose meowed over her shoulder at her friends. "One of you can stay and help me with the kits."

Amberheart shot to Sedgepelt's side and sat by her head, starting to knead her shoulder. "It'll be okay, Sedgepelt." She meowed calmly. "Think of the wonderful times you'll have with your kits."

Sedgepelt let out a cry and thrashed as a kit slid onto the moss by her tail. Leaning forward, Lilyrose nipped the membrane and gave the kit a quick examination. *Small, feeble, but looking good.* Relief flooded through her as she pushed the gray-and-white kit to Amberheart.

"Lick her and get her blood flowing," Lilyrose told the ginger-and-white warrior and ran her paws along Sedgepelt's flank. "Four more, Sedgepelt. You're doing great."

"I-I can't do it," the white she-cat whimpered, looking tearfully up at Lilyrose. "Th-there's too many."

"If you don't," Amberheart mewed between licks. "The kits will die and you may as well." She grasped her kit by the scruff and pushed it against the queen's muzzle. "Do you want her future littermates to die?"

Sedgepelt couldn't reply as she cried out and Amberheart hastily pulled the kitten away. Almost at once, a second kit fell onto the moss. Doing the same to the membrane as the first kit, Lilyrose dragged the kit to her paws and gave it a few quick licks. *Small, like his sister.*

"I've got the stick," Dawnflame's muffled voice came from behind her and she pushed the kit toward her. As Dawnflame gave the stick to Sedgepelt and started to lick the kit, Sedgepelt let out a cry and another kit thumped onto the moss.

Turning her head, she called. "Wildwing! Swiftsoul!" Turning back around, she nipped the kit free from the membrane and as the two toms entered, she shoved it to Swiftsoul and ran her paw across Sedgepelt's flank. "Two more."

In a few heartbeats, there were five kits suckling at Sedgepelt's belly. Lilyrose gave the queen her herbs and ushered the other warriors out of the nursery. "I'll be right back," she promised the queen before bundling out of the den. Facing her friends, she nodded to Wildwing and watched him go answer the questions of the Clan.

"The kits are so cute!" Amberheart purred happily, her tail curling over her back until it brushed her ears. "Sedgepelt's got her paws full with five of them."

"I wonder what she'll name them." Swiftsoul chimed in, pressing lovingly against Dawnflame.

"I don't think she'll be the one to name them," Lilyrose meowed darkly. When her friends looked at her in shock, she explained that Sedgepelt wanted her to take the kits. "I have to take them. I don't want them to be raised when their mother can't have them." She finished.

Dawnflame was quiet for a few heartbeats, making Lilyrose nervous. Finally, she spoke. "Do you want some help raising them?" She asked, her tail flicking. "We could help."

Relief flooded through Lilyrose as she nodded. "Thank you," she whispered and touched noses with each of her friends. "It'll be great to have more paws."

"Why don't we go to Sedgepelt and tell her?" Suggested Swiftsoul. "After all, she has a right as their mother to know. Besides, how can we raise them when they have to be weaned from her milk?"

Amberheart piped up. "We could have them suckle until they're a half-moon old and then move them into your den." She nodded to Lilyrose. "Then, we can wean them off milk."

Lilyrose nodded. "Good idea, Amberheart." She praised and turned around, padding into the nursery with her friends in tow. "Sedgepelt?"

The white queen lifted her head from the mossy nest and looked at

them. She looked exhausted and Lilyrose twitched her ear. "I heard it all," she croaked. "I-I decided to name them while you were talking."

Dawnflame pricked up, excited, and intrigued. "What did you name them?" She asked curiously.

Sedgepelt used the tip of her tail to touch the kits so they didn't stir. "Blackberrykit for this one," she touched the gray-and-white she-kit. "Whorlkit for this one," she poked the gray tabby tom with white paws. "Riverkit for her," the white-and-gray patched kit. "Topazkit for her," the black-and-brown kit fidgeted when her mother's tail touched her rump. "And Yonderkit for the last one."

"Beautiful names," commented Lilyrose and she dipped her head. "We'll let you rest now and I'll check in on you in the morning." She herded her friends out of the nursery when Sedgepelt called her back.

"I wanted to thank you for taking these kits," she rasped, her voice dry. "I know I couldn't raise them the way I wanted. They'll have a better life with you and your friends."

Lilyrose said nothing as she dipped her head and exited the den. She let out an exhausted sigh as she headed for her den, but was stopped by Goldenfire.

"Hello, busy bee," he purred as he touched noses with Lilyrose. The deputy's green eyes were bright and gentle as he fell into step beside her. "Where are you off to?"

"My nest," Lilyrose purred dryly as she looked at the tom. "What's up? Do you need anything?" She asked, her ear twitching as a vine brushed across it.

Goldenfire's eyes sparkled. "Nope." He shrugged and followed her into her den. "How are Sedgepelt's kits?" He mewed, sitting down as she settled in her nest.

Lilyrose tucked her paws under herself and yawned, her tail curling around her. "They're very, very small and weak." She responded

wearily. "But they'll survive." Resting her chin on the moss, she looked up at Goldenfire.

The golden tom's green eyes glowed affectionately and he bent over and gently licked her between the ears. "I'll let you sleep," he purred softly. "See you in the morning, Lilyrose."

"Mhm," Lilyrose murmured as she closed her eyes and fell into a dream that smelled of milk and felt safe and warm.

Chapter Thirteen

"Are you accepting visitors?" Purred Swiftsoul's voice as he poked his head into Lilyrose's cave. The tom's eyes rested on her with amusement gleaming in his hazel eyes.

"Certainly," replied Amberheart as she nuzzled the top of Topazkit's head. "These rascals are a pawful!"

"Easy for you to say," Lilyrose grumbled, trying to coax Riverkit off her head as she nibbled on her ear. She adored the kits, of course, but they were constantly under paw. Even at seven sunrises old, their eyes were starting to open, as well as their ears.

Swiftsoul laughed as he approached them. "Looks like she's got you," he observed, blinking warmly to Riverkit. "Need a little help with that?"

Lilyrose nodded, but Riverkit sank her claws into her head and she winced. "Where's Dawnflame? Isn't she going to stop by and see the kits?" She asked. *Is she having second doubts about raising these kits?*

"On patrol," Swiftsoul replied and grasped Riverkit's scruff and gently put her on the ground. "Goldenfire insisted she go patrol the GlacierClan border in case they're trying anything."

Lilyrose was thrown into the dream she had with the Clan founders. Glacierstar seemed like such a charming, chill cat. *Does he know every Clan is so suspicious of his Clan?* Shaking her head, she yawned. "These kits tire me out." She meowed.

Amberheart glanced humorously at Lilyrose, tail curling as Whorlkit tried to pounce aimlessly at it. "You should've seen Dawnflame with Hailfrost and Meadowheart," she joked and playfully flicked her ears at Swiftsoul, who was laying on his belly as Yonderkit and Blackberrykit starting climbing on him. "She wanted to be in the forest so bad!"

Swiftsoul rolled on his back and looked up at Amberheart, a goofy smile across his face. "Not my fault," he defended himself playfully. "We both wanted kits."

Lilyrose gave him a knowing look. "Technically, it is your fault." She meowed. Before he could argue, she looked over at Amberheart. "I'm going to get something to the prey-pile. What do you want?"

Amberheart blinked at her. "I'll take a mouse or two," she purred. "Thank you." Flicking her gaze to Swiftsoul. "What do you want from the fresh-kill pile?"

Swiftsoul waved a paw. "I don't need anything," he replied and gently boxed Blackberrykit's ears. "These five will need Sedgepelt in a bit."

Lilyrose pushed herself to her paws, dislodging Riverkit as she tried to suckle. Looking around at the kits, she meowed. "I'll see if Sedgepelt's in the camp."

Amberheart looked confused. "She'd better," she snorted. "She just had kits that aren't weaned!" She rolled onto her side and flexed her paws, claws unsheathing and retracting.

Lilyrose had to agree and she hopped out of the den, grateful as the weak sunlight bathed her back and relaxed her. She spotted the small prey-pile and winced. As she headed over and picked up a small mouse and a vole. Carrying the prey between her jaws, she headed back to her den.

"Help!" The distressed cry startled her as she whirled around to see a lithe black tom exploding into the camp. She dropped her prey and unsheathed her claws, fur rippling along her spine. "Help me, please!"

"Who are you?" Demanded Blueheart as she arched her back, shielding the nursery, her tail lashing back and forth.

The tom looked panicked as Lilyrose got reluctantly closer. He looked so familiar that Lilyrose wondered if he was in a Clan but wasn't going to Gatherings as often. His yellow eyes were stretched

wide with fear. "Please, you have to help me!"

"What's wrong?" She asked, getting closer slowly in case she scared the tom into being hostile.

"It's my mate," he panted, fixing his gaze on hers. "She's kitting and we don't have a medicine cat!"

Lilyrose stopped and stared at the black tom, baffled. "You know about medicine cats?" She asked, surprised that this loner, kittypet, or rogue knew of the Clan's healers.

His yellow eyes gleamed with panic and anxiety as he worked his claws into the ground. "Yes," he spat and looked around. "Please help me!"

Lilyrose thought fast as she spun around and darted into her den. Amberheart sprang to her paws and hurried to Swiftsoul, looking confused.

"What's happened?" She asked, glancing nervously at the den entrance. "We heard yelling and had to calm the kits down. The poor scraps were frightened out of their fur!"

Lilyrose didn't answer as she grabbed burnet, borage, and camomile. "Get a stick," she ordered over her shoulder as she hurried out of her den to the black tom. He was being surrounded by warriors and had no way of escape. "Take me to your mate." She pushed her way through her Clanmates and looked at the tom.

The loner swiftly nodded, spun around, and shot out of the camp, leaving Lilyrose scrambling after him. She heard paws thumping behind her and saw Swiftsoul carrying a thick tree branch, eyes wide with wonder and excitement.

"Pear!" The tom hopped into a ditch and half slid half fell down the side and skidded to a stop at a cream she-cats side. "Are you okay?" He licked her between her ears and looked at Lilyrose. "Help her."

"It-it hurts," whined the pregnant she-cat as she pawed at the ground. Lilyrose didn't see her claws tearing the grass and suspected

that she didn't want to seem aggressive. "I feel like I'm being ripped apart!"

"You'll be okay," Lilyrose meowed and sat on her haunches. "Swiftsoul, give her the stick. Bite on it when the pain gets too much." She told the she-cat and ran a paw down her bulging flank. "You've got three kits to deliver. You can do this."

The she-cat whimpered and grasped the stick between her jaws, her paws planted firmly on either side. She let out a cry and bit down, writhing. At once a small body slithered onto the grass, its fur mottled. Using a claw to tear open the membrane, she gave the kit to Swiftsoul and told him to lick.

"You have a beautiful son," Swiftsoul commented between licks. He looked up at the black tom as he watched with intense interest.

The she-cat let out another yowl of pain and a black, white, and dark ginger calico kit thumped onto the grass. Once the membrane was broken, Lilyrose gave it to the black tom to lick.

"One more," she urged and looked supportingly at the she-cat. "Focus." Making sure she wasn't bleeding, Lilyrose pressed on her flank while she pushed, and out came another kit. The kit was pale-gray and had darker patches like a cloud. Freeing the kit from the sack, she gently pressed it to its mother's muzzle and watched the she-cat twist and lick her kit.

"She's a natural," purred Swiftsoul once the kit he'd been licking was awake and squealing. "I think this one's hungry." After pushing the kit to its mother's belly, Swiftsoul looked at the black tom, who looked overwhelmed with emotion. "First litter?"

The tom looked startled and he shook his head. "No. I-I had a mate that had kits before I met Pear." He gestured with his paw to his mate. "She was beautiful and we had a healthy litter of four. She named them Goosekit, Copperkit, Lilykit, and Streamkit." He let out a content sigh. "I wish I could see them again."

Lilyrose stared in shock at the tom. No wonder he looked so familiar! She'd never known her father and scarcely saw her

mother, Whiteblaze, who lived in DawnClan before Shellfur told her of her passing. *Perhaps this is my father!* Hope flared in her chest as she struggled to find her voice. "I-I think your kin are closer than you think," she managed and the tom looked at her. "What's your name?"

Swiftsoul's hazel eyes widened with realization and he bounced to his paws, circling Lilyrose. "We should take them to Froststar," he whispered in her ear, making it twitch.

Lilyrose felt her heart thud in her chest as she stared at the black tom. Her head spun as she thought about the black-furred and yellow-eyed toms she'd met. "Agreed." She murmured.

The black tom blinked. "My name is Lark." He replied, confused. His yellow gaze flitted to his mate and he prodded her shoulder with a paw. "Come on, these OakClan cats are going to take us to their leader."

Pear opened her eyes and Lilyrose blinked at her. "Alright," she heaved herself to her paws as Swiftsoul, Lark, and Lilyrose took a kit each to carry.

They made it to the camp in a few heartbeats and Lilyrose struggled to keep the squirming ball of fur still in her jaws. She led the way past all the warriors who were swarming the newcomers and into the nursery. Sedgepelt's kits were suckling at her belly while their mother slept. After settling Pear into a nest, she dismissed Swiftsoul to check on Amberheart and Dawnflame as she took Lark to Froststar.

While they went by her Clanmates, some of them whispered and murmured amongst themselves.

"What is he doing here?" Asked Meadowheart as she watched Lark pass. "Who is he?"

Graywolf dropped her voice to a low growl as she replied, her orange eyes glittering. "He's a DawnClan warrior who ran away after Nightstar was defeated. The coward."

Lilyrose shot the two she-cats a glare and called for her leader. "Froststar! There's someone you need to meet!" She meowed, wanting to shoo her Clanmates away and give Lark space. *He ought to be exhausted.* She thought, casting the loner a glance.

"What is it?" Froststar's rasp came from inside her den and Lilyrose slipped inside, flicked her tail as a warning to Lark. "Who is it?"

"It's me and a loner, Froststar," Lilyrose replied as she neared her sickly leader. Froststar's usual sleek and soft tabby fur was matted and unkempt like she hadn't washed in days. "His name is Lark. His mate Pear just kitted in the woods and I brought her into the nursery."

Froststar's glassy blue eyes widened when she saw Lark and she scrambled to her paws, mouth parted in a gasp. "Larkflight!" She meowed, stunned as she stared at the black tom. "What are you doing here?"

Lilyrose frowned in confusion at her leader before turning to the tom, who was frozen in place. "You-you're Larkflight?" She meowed hoarsely. Realization dawned on her as she took in his shocked and grim expression. His broad shoulders, sleek tail, lithe build, and his face seemed so familiar. It was him. Her father.

Lark seemed unable to speak as his eyes darted from his daughter to the leader. "I-I can leave." As he spoke, he headed for the den entrance. Lilyrose stopped him with her tail before he could slip out. She wasn't going to let her father run away again. Not this time.

"You didn't even say goodbye," she croaked, suddenly feeling twice her age as she stared at her father. Lilyrose held his gaze and felt anger and betrayal flood through her. "You didn't say goodbye!" She was shouting now, not caring that her leader was watching her. "You could have stayed! Why did you leave? We needed you!"

Lark took an alarmed step back and his sleek-furred tail bushed out. "I-I had to," he meowed, but his voice faltered. "Nightstar would've killed me-"

"She's dead!" Lilyrose spat, claws scraping against the ground. "The moment Thorntail died, you left us! You left us to fend for ourselves while Nightstar took over NightClan!" She suddenly couldn't stand the sight of him as he stared on in shock. "You were friends with her," she meowed, her voice as cold as ice. "You could've helped us kill her!"

"She was too powerful." Lark shot back, looking angry. His nostrils flared and his pelt bristled with indignation. "What good could I have done?"

"You could've raised us," Lilyrose hissed bitterly. "Do you even know that Adderseed and Whiteblaze are dead?" Lark's eyes widened with horror, the anger dissolving. He opened his mouth to speak but Lilyrose went on. "Of course you don't. You could've stayed and helped Whiteblaze raise us but you didn't. Do you know why?" She took a threatening step towards her father, teeth bared into a snarl. "Because you're a mouse-hearted coward. I don't need you. None of us need you!" She shoved past him and sprinted out of the den, hearing her father call after her.

"Lilyrose!" Swiftsoul's voice was drowned out by her heart roaring in her ears as she stalked into her den, tears blurring her vision as memories of being alone crowded her mind. "Are you alright? We all heard shouting."

Lilyrose spun around and turned on her friend, snarling. "Go away and leave me alone!" She screeched. Tears slid gracefully down her cheeks and hit the stone floor with a *pit-pat pit*. Swiftsoul took a step back. "I don't need you! I don't need anyone!"

Swiftsoul's hazel eyes clouded with pain as he bowed his head, swung around, and sulked out of the den. His tail trailed after him as Lilyrose threw herself into her nest, hissing as her father's eyes burned in her mind when she closed her eyes. *He ruined everything!*

Chapter Fourteen

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Tall Tree for a Clan meeting!" Lilyrose pricked her ears at Goldenfire's call. She imagined the golden tom perched on the leader's branch and her fur grew hot.

"I'll be right back, Froststar." She meowed, her voice hollow and void of emotion as she dragged her paws out of the leader's den. As leafbare went on, her leader got sicker and sicker by the day. The tansy Shellfur and Splashpaw had given her were working, but it wasn't strong enough to fight off the growing whitecough.

She remembered Thorntail falling ill when she'd first been apprenticed under Shellfur, Reedfrost, and Timberskip. He'd gotten a nasty case of greencough when Nightstar, Nightshrike at the time, was expecting his kits. When Nightshrike killed the former GlacierClan warrior, Rowantail, Thorntail had succumbed to his illness and died after he'd been weakened in battle.

Slinking down the rocky incline that led to Froststar's cave, she settled down to the side in the shadows of some brambles. Tipping her head back, she took in Goldenfire's stance as he sat on the leader's branch. His golden tabby fur seemed to glow like the sun, his fern-like eyes blazing with pride and a fierce love for his Clan. Lilyrose felt her heart skip a beat.

"Cats of OakClan, I have an announcement to make." The tom meowed, his fluffy tail twitching. "Froststar and I have talked about this for the past few days, and we have agreed to let Lark and Pear join the Clan with their kits."

Lilyrose stared at the tabby deputy in shock. A flash of black caught her eye and she glanced over and saw Swiftsoul and Lark sitting side-by-side with Dawnflame and Amberheart. Bitterness rose in her throat like bile as she curled her claws into the ground and glared at the grass.

Goldenfire went on briskly. "Lark and Pear, please step forward." He meowed and Lilyrose saw the creamy she-cat and her father pad forward. From the nursery, Lilyrose flattened her ears at the sound of the three kits crying. "Do you two promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Pear seemed to shake a little but she forced herself to hold Goldenfire's gaze. "I-I do." She meowed, her voice shaking slightly.

Lark puffed out his chest and Lilyrose curled her lip in disdain. "I do." He declared.

Goldenfire nodded approvingly. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Lark, you will be known as Larkflight. May StarClan light your path in adapting to OakClan's way of life and territory." He dipped his head to Larkflight before looking at Pear. "Pear, since you have not trained to be a warrior, you will be an apprentice. Until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Pearpaw. Graywolf is a strong and witty warrior and she will be your mentor when you are out of the nursery."

Pearpaw broke in. "Actually," she meowed awkwardly and Lilyrose narrowed her eyes. *True warriors don't interrupt at a Clan meeting.* She thought. "I can't be a warrior at all." She raised a paw and struggled to unsheathe her claws. "My housefolk got rid of my claws. I couldn't hunt or fight if I tried. I would rather help around the camp and be in the nursery if that's alright."

Goldenfire blinked, startled before nodding uncertainly. *A cat who doesn't contribute to their Clan shouldn't be in a Clan unless they're an elder.* Lilyrose thought darkly, glaring at Pearpaw. "Very well. From this moment on, you will be known as Pearpool. May StarClan light your path, always."

"Larkflight! Pearpool! Larkflight! Pearpool!" Cheered the Clan as the new cats soaked it all in.

Lilyrose scoffed to herself and headed for her den, hating every moment that went by. During the last few days, Froststar had gotten worse but no other cats had fallen ill. It was a relief, of course, but every task felt like a chore to Lilyrose. She used to enjoy being a

medicine cat before Larkflight and Pearpool came, but now it felt like a burr in her pelt whenever a cat needed something from her.

She went to her herb store and saw some yarrow laying around. After putting the vomit-inducing leaves away, she starting clawing the old moss from her nest and buried it right outside her den. She let out a sigh and sat down to think. Her tail curled around her paws as she closed her eyes, trying to clear her mind.

"Lilyrose?" A voice at the mouth of her den made her head jerk up. Her eyes snapped open and she saw Talonclaw awkwardly shifting his paws.

"What do you need, Talonclaw?" Lilyrose asked half-heartedly, rising to her paws with a grunt. "Thorn in your paw? Bellyache?"

The silver-and-white tabby tom shook his head and Lilyrose twitched her ear in irritation. "I-I was wondering if I could talk to you about something." He mumbled, ears flattened against his head.

Her irritation disappeared in an instant and she looked at the young warrior, stunned. "About what?" Lilyrose sat back down and invited the tom to sit with her. "What's on your mind?"

Talonclaw sheepishly approached her and settled down a mouse-length away from her. His thick-furred tail flicked nervously around his paws as he gulped. "W-well, I don't think I want to be in OakClan anymore." He whispered, his eyes studying the stone floor.

"You don't want to be a warrior?" Lilyrose was taken by surprise. She thought every warrior loved hunting and defending their Clan. It was, after all, an honor gifted by StarClan.

The tom shook his head. "I-I don't want to be in OakClan at all," he meowed, sounding scared as he hesitantly met her gaze. "I-I'm grateful that I got to grow up and train here, but I don't want to be here anymore."

"How come?" Lilyrose asked gently, trying to soothe his nerves. *Does he want to leave as Larkflight did?* She forced the thought to the back of her mind and watched the tom carefully.

"I want to leave and join GlacierClan," Talonclaw blurted out. Lilyrose's eyes widened as he hurried on. "I've met someone amazing during the last Gathering and...she's expecting my kits." He dropped his gaze to his paws and Lilyrose leaned forward to listen. "She told me when we met the other night that she couldn't bear to leave her Clan. S-so I told her I'd leave mine and join GlacierClan."

Lilyrose sat back on her haunches, suddenly feeling calmer than she had since Larkflight turned up with Pearpool. "Well," she began. "I believe that if you told her you'd join her Clan, to do it. But tell Froststar, Goldenfire, and your siblings first."

Talonclaw looked up at her, eyes wide and hopeful. "Y-you're letting me go?" He sounded surprised and Lilyrose saw him straighten.

She purred with amusement and nodded. "If you're going to be happier with her and your future kits, then why should I keep you here?"

Talonclaw sprang to his paws and broke into a loud purr. "Oh, thank you, Lilyrose!" He meowed, sounding happier than he had when he came in. "I'll go tell them right away!" He scurried out of the den, joy washing off his pelt in giant waves.

Lilyrose purred with amusement and felt her chest grow lighter. She padded out of the den and headed for the warrior's den, looking for her friends. She poked her head inside. "Anyone in here?" She called.

"Just me," replied the voice of Blueheart. "Everyone else is on patrol," Lilyrose noted how dry and raspy the senior warrior's voice sounded and heard her cough.

"Are you alright, Blueheart?" Lilyrose questioned, padding inside the den and narrowing her eyes through the gloom. She spotted the blue tabby warrior hunched in her nest and headed over.

"Just thirsty," she answered and coughed again. "I must've swallowed something in my sleep." Rising to her paws, Blueheart bustled by Lilyrose and brushed against her.

Lilyrose felt a bolt of alarm as she felt the warrior's hot skin against her. *She's sick.* "Blueheart!" She followed the senior she-cat as she stumbled toward a small stream that ran behind the elder's den.

"I'm fine, Lilyrose," Blueheart meowed over her shoulder, her eyes glassy and clouded. "Just a bit thirsty." She crouched in front of the stream and started to lap at the icy water. She drank for what seemed like a moon before rising to her full weight. Blueheart swiped her tongue over her mouth with a satisfied sigh. "Much better."

"I really think I should take a look-" Lilyrose stretched out a paw to the she-cat when a call cut her off.

"Blueheart!" It was Goldenfire. The deputy trotted toward her and rubbed his muzzle against hers. "What are you doing up and about? You should be resting in the nursery."

Blueheart let out a dry purr that rattled. If Goldenfire noticed, he didn't show it. "I don't always need to be in the nursery," she pointed out, her voice weary. Lilyrose's ears pricked. "These kits won't die if I walk around the camp."

Lilyrose felt her heart shatter in her chest. "Kits?" She meowed, stunned. *Blueheart is so old! She can't have kits!*

Goldenfire blinked at her for a moment. "She's a moon along, Lilyrose." He stated, his voice matter-of-fact. "Haven't you noticed?"

Lilyrose looked at the senior warrior closely and saw her rounder flanks for the first time. *How could I have not noticed?* She forced a purr as she fought down frustration. "That's great. Come by if you feel off." She meowed to Blueheart and hurried away without another word.

"Lilyrose?" A painfully familiar voice rang in her ears and she spun around to see Amberheart, Dawnflame, and Swiftsoul. Her friends were watching her with concerned eyes as she blinked. "Do you have a moment?"

Lilyrose hastily nodded. "What do you need?" She asked, trying her

best to avoid eye contact with Swiftsoul, recalling her harsh words the last time they spoke.

"We need to talk to you," Dawnflame answered, her voice strong but gentle. She angled her ears to the dirtplace tunnel and led the others toward it. As they got to the tunnel, the cream tabby faced Lilyrose. "What's been going on with you?" She demanded, suddenly angry.

Lilyrose took a step back and her eyes stretched wide before narrowing. "What do you mean?" She meowed, her voice uncertain. She felt exposed as she was surrounded by her friends, making her feel remarkably small.

"You know what I mean," Dawnflame meowed, her voice strained and curt. Lilyrose tried not to flinch. "You've been snappy and not yourself when you found out who Larkflight really is."

"So I'm under stress because there are more cats to take care of," Lilyrose countered tartly. "That's what being a medicine cat is all about, Dawnflame. We're stressed and have duties that aren't like warriors."

"You haven't been seeing the kits." Swiftsoul cut in, his voice abnormally sharp when speaking to Lilyrose. His hazel eyes burned into hers and she forced herself not to look away. "They've been wondering where you went after Larkflight and Pearpool joined. They miss you."

Lilyrose shuffled her paws uncomfortably. "They see me when I see how Pearpool and her kits are doing," she mumbled.

Amberheart narrowed her eyes. "You only ever see Rainkit, Ripplekit, and Smogkit when you go into the nursery." She pointed out, her voice tight. "Not the kits we promised Sedgepelt we'd raise."

"They don't need to constantly see a medicine cat who can barely notice when a cat is expecting," Lilyrose growled, turning her head away so she couldn't see the anger in her friends' eyes anymore. Her eyes found Blueheart as she limped out of the camp, probably on a

patrol.

"But they need the cat who knows what to do when they get hurt or sick," Dawnflame meowed, her tone gentler. "You're the Clan medicine cat. Every cat needs to trust that you'll be there when they need you."

"They should know even if they don't see me that often." She muttered, her voice bitter. "I don't want to talk about this anymore." Lilyrose stalked away from her friends, knowing that deep down, they were right.

***

The night air took Lilyrose's breath away as she stormed up the slope, heading for the Moonpool cavern. The half-moon glowed above her head as she stalked alongside Poppypool, GlacierClan's medicine cat. Ahead of her, she heard Sunnypaw, Shellfur's second apprentice, and Splashpaw's new denmate asking Shellfur what it was like to be in a big Clan.

According to Shellfur and Splashpaw, Sunnypaw wanted to be a medicine cat not just because there were too many apprentices and not enough mentors, but because she wanted to prove to her friends and family that she could be different from her siblings, who wanted to be warriors.

The energetic and smart yellow tabby was about as joyous as a kit on their first day out of the nursery. Despite being barely able to wrap a cobweb around a marigold poultice. Lilyrose had to admit that the Clans needed happy cats like Sunnypaw in the wake of a dark time.

Driftpaw, NightClan's medicine cat apprentice, was training under Poppypool so he could be a proper medicine cat for his Clan. The tom was older than Sunnypaw but a bit younger than Splashpaw, who was apprenticed about a quarter-moon before Driftpaw.

"What's the Gathering like?" Driftpaw asked Poppypool. He'd never been to a Gathering before, but Lilyrose couldn't help but mentally cuff the tom over the ears for asking such a stupid question.

Poppypool blinked warmly at the young cat and went on to explain what happened during the once-a-moon meetings the Clans had. Lilyrose barely heard the conversation as she picked up the pace and padded past Shellfur and his apprentices.

"In a hurry?" Splashpaw called after her, earning a light scolding from Shellfur.

"To get home," Lilyrose grumbled to herself but made sure the apprentice didn't hear. She liked Splashpaw, but she could be so annoying sometimes.

As she entered the cavern, a wave of cold washed over her as she headed for the Moonpool. What would StarClan want to tell her? That the Clans have something bad coming *again*? Turning around, she faced Shellfur and the other medicine cats.

"Are you ready, Lilyrose?" Shellfur asked, his voice kind. She had to admire his optimism and she dipped her head.

"I'm actually going to head back to my Clan," she meowed, trying not to give anything away. Shellfur's eyes widened, as did Poppypool's. "I'm not feeling too well and I think I could use some jupiner."

Poppypool's eyes grew concerned as she leaned forward and brushed her nose against her head. "You do feel kind of warm," she reasoned and nodded. "I'm sure StarClan wouldn't mind you missing a meeting because you're sick. Get well soon!"

"Hopefully you're fit to come next time." Driftpaw meowed, his voice cheery. "I want to know more about OakClan!"

Lilyrose smiled bashfully and ducked her head before slipping out of the cave, grateful that the others let her slip away. Digging her claws into the ground, she launched herself down the hill, paws flying over the ground as she tore through the field and charged into the forest.

Her mind was filled with one cat: Emberburn as she remembered him telling her to meet him at the Gathering Hollow. Lilyrose did

her best not to feel over-excited to see the tom but she couldn't help but feel better about the Larkflight situation.

She could see her breath as it came in pants. Her paws crunched on the snow that fell a few days earlier, making her pads sting. Lilyrose felt her ear tips began to burn from the cold, but could barely feel it as she made her way through the trees.

The shimmering lake came into her view as she burst from the trees and saw the cold sand covered by snow. The far hills that defined GlacierClan's territory seemed to glitter beyond the boundaries and Lilyrose felt her breath hitch as she recalled Talonclaw's wishes to leave and join the rival Clan. The tom hadn't left yet, but Lilyrose assumed he wanted to leave before the next Gathering.

As she crossed the frozen lake carefully to the other side, Lilyrose padded into the clearing and sniffed the air. Was Emberburn really here? Did he want to see her still?

"Emberburn?" Lilyrose called. Her breath billowed like a cloud in front of her and she found herself breathing in the icy air until it hurt her chest. "Are you there?"

"Is that you, Lilyrose?" A startled voice made her eyes widen as she realized the cat who spoke was Amberheart. Her friend had snuck out of the camp!

"What's going on?" A different mew met her ears as she realized her friend wasn't alone. Lilyrose followed the voice and saw the ginger-and-white she-cat standing barely a mouse-length away from a dark gray tabby tom. His amber eyes narrowed at Lilyrose as she approached. "Have you been spying on us?" He demanded.

Ice froze her belly as she realized the tom was Adderseed of DawnClan. "What is he doing here?" She demanded, turning on Amberheart with a snarl. "He's a DawnClan warrior!"

Amberheart flattened her ears and refused to meet her gaze. Lilyrose felt anger rise inside of her as she glared at Adderseed, claws unsheathing.

"What are you doing here?" She demanded. His tail lashed back and forth as she stared at the DawnClan warrior. "Are you going to hurt Amberheart?"

Adderseed snorted. "Don't be ridiculous," he scolded her as though she were a kit, which infuriated her more. "Do you think I would harm her?"

"He-he won't hurt me, Lilyrose." Amberheart's quiet mew took Lilyrose by surprise as she turned her gaze to her friend; her Clanmate. "We-we're mates."

Chapter Fifteen

"Until you have earned your full medicine cat name, you will be known as Blackberrypaw." Goldenfire nodded to the new apprentice. "Lilyrose is a talented and skilled medicine cat and I know that she will teach you to be just like her."

Blackberrypaw leaped to her paws, eyes gleaming as she nodded eagerly. She met Lilyrose's gaze happily and trotted toward her, her tail sticking straight up as the Clan started to cheer.

"Blackberrypaw! Whorlpaw! Riverpaw! Topazpaw! Yonderpaw!" The names of Sedgepelt's kits filled the late leafbare air as Lilyrose smiled at her new apprentice.

"Meeting dismissed." Goldenfire meowed and made his way down the Tall Tree. After leaping down, he headed for the nursery where Blueheart would be waiting with their newborn kits. The senior warrior had given birth to them in the middle of the Gathering and Lilyrose had Poppypool help her. The she-cat had given birth to four kits: three she-kits, and a tom. They didn't have names yet, but Goldenfire had expressed how much he wanted to name at least one of them.

Blackberrypaw bounced in front of Lilyrose and she looked down at her apprentice. "What are we going to do first?" She chirped.

Lilyrose smiled and pointed her tail behind her in the den. "Meet me in there. I'll be right back and we can start your first day as a medicine cat's apprentice." She instructed.

Her apprentice nodded and disappeared into the cave. Lilyrose got to her paws and headed for Amberheart, who was struggling to get to the nursery. Since discovering her secret meeting with Adderseed over a moon ago, Amberheart told her that she was expecting his kits and agreed not to meet with him anymore.

Lilyrose had to report her to Goldenfire, who confined her to the

camp until her kits were apprentices. Froststar had lost a life because of her illness and was forced to give birth to her three kits in her den with only Lilyrose as help. She was slowly getting better, but her kits were too small and weak to be around a sickly cat.

"Are you alright?" She meowed when she reached her friend, keeping her voice kind and low. "How do you feel today?"

"No better than yesterday," Amberheart groaned as she lurched to one side. Lilyrose strode to her side and supported her weight on her shoulder. "I feel tired, sick, and I want to go in the forest."

To see Adderseed, Lilyrose met her gaze and winced at the raw pain in her friend's green eyes. The words weren't spoken, but the longing in Amberheart's eyes said enough.

"Are you feeling dizzy?" Lilyrose asked, changing the subject.

Amberheart nodded and stumbled forward, heading for the nursery. "I want to lay in my nest and make sure Froststar's kits are getting some milk." She meowed, her voice slurring.

"I'll come by later with some borage for your belly!" She called after her as her tail disappeared into the nursery. Turning on her heels, Lilyrose headed back to her den. "Where are you, Blackberrypaw?" She meowed into the darkness as she slipped inside.

"By your nest!" Blackberrypaw's voice rang in the den, loud and clear. Lilyrose frowned and trotted towards her apprentice's voice. She found her pawing a few pawfuls of moss in the shape of a messy nest beside hers.

"What are you doing?" She asked, watching the she-cat with interest. A bramble tendril was sticking out of the side and Lilyrose reached out a paw, curled it around her forepaw, and threw it to the side.

Blackberrypaw looked alarmed and she stopped what she was doing. She pressed her belly to the cold stone floor, ears flat against her head. "I-I thought I'd make my new nest next to yours," she whispered, eyes on her paws. "I'm sorry."

Lilyrose flicked her ear. "It's alright," she purred and nudged her to her paws. "Make sure the moss is compact and sturdy so it doesn't break apart." She nodded to a clump that was slowly breaking away from the rest. "Line it with a few feathers, add some brambles, and you'll be done."

Blackberrypaw's green eyes widened and she nodded. "Thanks!" She meowed, her voice grateful as she turned to fix her nest. When she was done pushing the moss back together, she looked up at Lilyrose. "Should I get the feathers and brambles?"

Lilyrose shook her head. "That can happen later. Right now, we need to take some borage to Amberheart, she's been complaining about a bellyache. We'll also need some feverfew for her headache."

Blackberrypaw seemed lost as she listed what they needed. "What do they do?" She asked.

"Borage is good for a queen's milk flow and feverfew helps with headaches." Lilyrose explained, already heading for the herb stores before she stopped. After getting a few leaves of both herbs, she placed them in front of her apprentice.

"Which one is which?" Blackberrypaw asked, trotting over with her tail kinked over her back. "They look the same."

Lilyrose swallowed back a purr of amusement and cleared her throat. "That's for you to find out," she meowed. When Blackberrypaw's eyes widened, she added. "You decide which is which and if it's right, I'll take you on a herb hunt."

"Really?" Blackberrypaw gasped, her eyes sparkling. When Lilyrose nodded, she squirmed in front of the two plants and stared at them. She raised a shaking paw and hesitated over the borage before putting it over the feverfew.

"You can do this," Lilyrose encouraged, her tail tip twitching impatiently.

"This one," she placed her paw on the feverfew. "It's feverfew, right?" Her green eyes looked hopefully up at her mentor and

Lilyrose nodded. "I did it!" Blackberrypaw bounced to her paws, tail waving in excitement.

Lilyrose waved her tail. "Calm down," she chided and angled her ears to the feverfew and borage. "Grab those. We need to give those to Amberheart, check on Froststar's kits, see how Froststar is doing, see how Pearpool and Blueheart are doing with their kits, and then we need to go herb collecting."

Blackberrypaw nodded, too muffled by the herbs to speak clearly as she followed Lilyrose into the clearing. "Waff are they're names?" She asked.

"Froststar's kits are named Bearkit, Cypresskit, and Splinterkit." Lilyrose meowed, her tail raised and flicking back and forth. "Pearpool's kits are named Rainkit, Ripplekit, and Smogkit. And Blueheart's kits are named Tumblekit, Larchkit, Rosekit, and Shinekit."

Blueheart and Froststar kitted hours apart and it wore Lilyrose to the bone. Having to quickly eat, snatch a little bit of rest, then rushing to Blueheart to help deliver her kits. Now that she had an apprentice, Lilyrose hoped it would be easier with Blackberrypaw.

"Amberheart," Lilyrose ducked inside the nursery with Blackberrypaw on her heels. "We brought the feverfew and borage." She meowed and padded toward the she-cat, who was curled in her nest.

Amberheart lifted her head and peered up at the two cats. Her tail waved as she heaved herself up, propping up on her elbows. "Thanks," she meowed as Lilyrose stepped back and let Blackberrypaw drop the feverfew and borage at her paws.

"Of course." Lilyrose nodded as Amberheart lapped up the herbs, grimacing at the sour taste. "That should do for your headache and bellyache." Turning away from her friend so she could sleep, she led her apprentice over to Blueheart and Pearpool.

"Hello, Lilyrose and Blackberrypaw." Purred Blueheart as she opened an eye to look up at them. "I assume you're checking on

Froststar's kits?"

"You assumed correctly." Blackberrypaw chirped and hopped over the queen to look at her kits. "Aw, they're so cute!" She meowed and crouched down to peer excitedly at the tiny kits.

"They're also very weak," Lilyrose warned as Blackberrypaw stretched out a paw to touch Rosekit's sleeping rump. "They can get sick very easily. That's why we check on them everyday." Turning her head to look at Blueheart, she added. "Anything different than yesterday?" She asked.

Blueheart shook her head, letting out a sigh. "Just as immobile and hungry." She joked and looked at the kits. "Although," Lilyrose pricked her ears. "Shinekit has been wheezing and coughing lately." Worry filled her orange eyes as she looked at her smallest kit.

"I'll come by with some honey and tansy before dusk," Lilyrose soothed as she touched her tail tip to the queen's shoulder. "It's probably just kitten cough, but we need to be safe."

"Lilyrose?" Blackberrypaw looked up at her mentor, her eyes wide like moons. Lilyrose turned her head to look questioningly at her apprentice. "It is normal for kits to have something sticking out of their belly?"

Blueheart's eyes widened and Lilyrose shot to Blackberrypaw's side and looked at the kits. She saw what she was talking about, and the fur on her shoulders flattened. "That's perfectly normal," she meowed and nodded to Blueheart, who relaxed. "You're kits look healthy. They'll be just fine."

"What about Froststar's kits?" Blackberrypaw bounced from Blueheart's nest to Pearpool's, which was empty but the kits were sleeping soundly in the moss. "They're so tiny!"

Lilyrose rolled her eyes in irritation and padded around to the nest, curling her tail around the sleeping its. While Pearpool's kits were older than Froststar's litter, they were barely bigger than the younger litter. "They need to be closely monitored to make sure nothing happens to them. Kits this young are at a bigger risk of

getting sick, especially in leafbare." She met Blackberrypaw's wide green eyes sternly. "Which is why we're checking on the kits first."

Blueheart yawned and rested her chin on her paws. "Tell Goldenfire to stop by sometime," she coughed and Lilyrose's ears pricked. Behind her, Blackberrypaw winced. "And tell Whorlpaw and Riverpaw to bring some more moss that isn't mostly thorns."

Lilyrose nodded uneasily and ushered Blackberrypaw out of the nursery. Her pelt crawled with nerves as she recalled the dryness in the queen's voice, her cough, and unusual thirst before she gave birth to her kits.

"Is she okay?" Blackberrypaw asked, looking worriedly over her shoulder, her ear flicking.

Lilyrose didn't reply as they headed for the leaders den. Her thoughts whirled as she thought of why Blueheart wasn't telling her about her obvious sickness. No other cat had showed signs of the same illness, and there wasn't any cat other than Froststar who had greencough or whitecough. She ground her teeth together as she led Blackberrypaw up the rocks and boulders that led to Froststar's isolated den. Pushing through the curtain of lichen and vines, Lilyrose made sure that Blackberrypaw was by her side before approaching Froststar's nest.

"Froststar?" Blackberrypaw meowed, her eyes glowing in the dark den like moss. "Are you in here?"

Lilyrose was about to scold her apprentice when there was shuffling in the nest and a groan. "Froststar?" She took a step forward, her thin tail flicking for Blackberrypaw to stay back. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Lilyrose." Froststar's growl rattled as the leader pushed herself to her paws and turned her pale eyes on the medicine cat. Lilyrose took a stunned step back, her tail bushing out. Her leader's eyes were glazed and had a strange sheen that she'd never seen before. *What's happened to her?* "Get out."

"W-what?" Blackberrypaw whimpered, pressing shakily against her mentor.

Lilyrose flattened her ears to her head and reached out a paw to feel her leader's fur. "Froststar-"

Froststar spun around, eyes narrowed and teeth bared. "I said, get out!" She screeched, swiping at the two she-cats with a unsheathed paw of claws.

Lilyrose leaped back with a sharp, shocked hiss. Her tail curled around Blackberrypaw and shoved her out of the den. "We'll check on you later, Froststar." She managed to say, trying not to show how much her voice was shaking. Turning away from her leader, she pushed Blackberrypaw out of the den and hurried away, sending the leader's den a fleeting glance.

"What's wrong with Froststar?" Her apprentice blinked up at her, tail waving. "Is she sick?"

Lilyrose twitched her tail. "I don't know," she meowed honestly. Looking down at Blackberrypaw, she added. "Come on, we should go on that herb hunt I promised you."

***

"Which one is this?" Lilyrose pushed a leaf of goldenrod in front of Blackberrypaw. A half-moon had gone by since Lilyrose and Blackberrypaw had seen Froststar being strange and the leader had been acting stranger and stranger everyday.

"Hmmm." Blackberrypaw glared down at the goldenrod. She'd just named tansy correctly and Lilyrose praised her, only to push something else in front of her. "Marigold?"

Lilyrose shook her head. "It's goldenrod." Blackberrypaw's ears drooped. "Good try, though." She meowed and licked the top of her apprentice's head. "What about this?" She pushed a small amount of catmint in front of her.

Blackberrypaw's eyes brightened as she sniffed the tantalizing scent of the catmint. "Catmint!" She exclaimed, her tail wagging like a dog.

"Very good!" Lilyrose purred and quickly put the precious herb

away. She rose to her paws and stretched, her jaws parting in a yawn. "I'm hungry, what about you?"

"Starving!" Blackberrypaw sprang to her paws and looked up at her mentor, her mouth stretched wide in a grin. "What do you think the hunting patrols brought back today?"

Lilyrose cracked a smile. "I'd say a thrush or pigeon." She guessed and whisked her tail, letting Blackberrypaw go in front of her while she followed.

Blackberrypaw's fluffy tail was kinked at the tip, and Lilyrose twitched her whiskers. "How many kits do you think Amberheart will have when she kits?" She asked over her shoulder.

Lilyrose blinked in surprise before she broke into a forced purr. "I'd say two or three." She meowed, remembering the horrified look on the ginger-and-white she-cat's face when she'd caught her and Adderseed at the Gathering Hollow. She shuddered as she shook her head, trying to clear it. "However many she has, StarClan will have blessed us once more."

Blackberrypaw stopped and Lilyrose crashed into her hindquarters, opening her mouth in a sharp hiss before she saw the fur along her back spike. "L-Lilyrose," she whispered, her voice tight with horror. "L-look."

Lilyrose followed the she-cat's gaze to the clearing and saw a slumped tabby shape in the center of the snowy camp. Her breath caught in her throat as she recognized Blueheart's heaving flanks. *Oh no.* Pushing by her apprentice, she rushed to the queen, crouching beside her limp form. *Please don't let her be dead.*

"Is she dead?" Blackberrypaw's whimper rang in her ears as she caught up, eyes ringed with fear.

Lilyrose looked at Blueheart and felt the heat rising from her body. Her heart clenched as she watched she queen's flank rise, fall, rise, fall, and grow still altogether. She hung her head and choked back a wail of grief as she curled her tail around Blackberrypaw, who

choked on her tears and sobbed silently into her mentor's gray-and-white shoulder.

Rustling of the camp entrance made Lilyrose look up to see Redstripe, Goldenfire, and Swiftsoul trotting into the camp, prey dangling from their jaws. Goldenfire was laughing with the two toms before his eyes drifted from them to Lilyrose then to his mate's limp form. He dropped his prey, a thin squirrel on the ground and let out a caterwaul. He fell against Swiftsoul, who was staring at Blueheart, his hazel eyes wide with horror.

"She's dead!" Goldenfire's cry broke Lilyrose's heart in two and she closed her eyes, sending a prayer to StarClan that Blueheart could watch her kits and mate from their hunting grounds.

Blackberrypaw's eyes were glazed as she grasped Blueheart's scruff in her jaws and dragged her toward the medicine cat den, her eyes bulging with effort.

Lilyrose hunched in the center of the clearing, her vision blurred as the world turned black around her. She could hear the muffled cries of Goldenfire and his kits as they saw their mother's body being dragged away to prepare for burial. Her heart ripped to pieces as she threw her head back into a mournful yowl.

***

"May you have swift hunting, warmth, and shelter when you sleep." Lilyrose meowed aloud as she stood above Blueheart's body, her eyes glassy. "May StarClan guide your paws to their hunting grounds." She leaned over and touched her nose to Blueheart's head and sighed. "Why couldn't you admit you were sick?" She murmured and raised her head.

Blackberrypaw was staring at Blueheart's corpse, her eyes mournful and wide. Lilyrose padded toward her apprentice, weaving through her grieving Clanmates and crouched beside her, tail curling over her back. "S-she died so suddenly," the apprentice whimpered, pressing against Lilyrose's side.

Lilyrose rasped her tongue over Blackberrypaw's head. "I know."

She murmured and glanced up at the sky. "She walks with StarClan and she will watch us from there."

Froststar raised her tabby head from Blueheart's body, her eyes cold. Lilyrose felt her fur prickle and Blackberrypaw glanced at her, eyes unreadable. "I knew it," growled the brown tabby leader. Her warriors turned to her, their eyes questioning. "GlacierClan did this to Blueheart."

The accusation hung in the air before Lilyrose jumped to her paws, fur bristling with indignation. "That's not true," she snapped. Froststar turned her glassy eyes on her and it made her blood run cold. "Blueheart died of illness."

"Why didn't you treat her?" Asked Wolfstripe, his blue eyes narrowed into harsh slits. "You're a medicine cat. You heal cats, not let them die."

Lilyrose glared at the warrior, her fur starting to rise on her back. "I tried to," she retorted. "She refused every single time."

Froststar lashed her tail and raced to the Tall Tree, clawing her way up. Her fur bristled as she perched on the leader's branch, eyes wild. "GlacierClan thinks they can poison our Clanmates and get away with it." She declared, her voice loud. The warrior's beneath her had their ears pricked, eyes wide with interest as the leader spoke. "I say we take this attack to them!" Her decree was met with a chorus of cheers and snarls from the warriors.

"We'll shred those flea-pelts for killing Blueheart!" Hissed Owlflight, who was circling Poolheart and Wildwing. "Teach those fox-hearts what happens when they kill our queens!"

Lilyrose began to panic as Blackberrypaw whimpered, her eyes stretched wide with horror. "Enough of this!" She yowled, but her attempts to get the Clan's attention was drowned out by the growing chant.

"OakClan! OakClan! OakClan!"

Chapter Sixteen

"When is the battle?" Blackberrypaw asked as she pushed the marigold onto the ledge it was kept on.

Lilyrose tried to avoid talking about the battle that was bound to happen no matter what she said. "I'm not sure," she meowed, her voice strained. "Do you have the rest of that chickweed?"

Blackberrypaw pushed the herb to her mentor and sat on her haunches as she watched Lilyrose put it away. Chickweed was like catmint, but not as strong. It was used if they had nothing left. "I wish I could help the warriors and my littermates in the battle." She meowed, her voice wistful.

Lilyrose stiffened as she kept quiet. She spun around and cleaned up the moss that was used to soak in water. After pushing the moss in a hole in the cave wall, she cleared her throat. "The warriors have the battle covered." She meowed, trying to get off the subject. "Where's that coltsfoot you collected?"

Blackberrypaw pointed her tail to where the coltsfoot was stored and Lilyrose nodded. "Why can't we fight with the warriors?" She asked. "We can help!"

Lilyrose felt her chest tighten. "We help in many other ways," she meowed, her voice stern as she turned to her apprentice. "We heal the cats who get injured while they fight for our survival. In turn, we make sure they don't get horribly sick or die from their wounds."

The apprentice huffed. "But why can't we learn how to fight?" She whined, plucking at the ground with a claw. "We could be of more use in the fight!"

"And risk getting slaughtered ourselves?" Lilyrose shook her head, paws working against the ground. "We can't do that. We are medicine cats. As such, we are outside Clan rivalries and have to focus on healing instead of harming." Her eyes hardened as

Blackberrypaw opened her mouth to speak.

"But we should still learn how to hunt!" She retorted, her fluffy tail starting to bristle. "What if the Clan starts to starve? What good will our herbs do to empty bellies?"

"The proper herbs will give our Clanmates strength and subdue the hunger that gnaws at their belly." Lilyrose twitched her tail tip as her apprentice argued with her. "If we are out hunting and a cat gets badly wounded, what if they die or get worse before we get back? We are better off doing what we do best."

"Don't you get bored of being a medicine cat?" Blackberrypaw demanded, her voice rising. "If Froststar ordered me to fight, I'd do it in a heartbeat! You should too!"

"Do *not* argue with me, Blackberrypaw!" Lilyrose snarled, watching as defiance lit in her apprentice's eyes but saw her flinch. "As my apprentice, you will listen to me before any other cat. You are training to be a medicine cat, not a warrior. If you think you'll serve your Clan better as a warrior, talk to Goldenfire and Froststar and change mentors." Her fur bristled and she struggled to keep her voice tame. "Until then, you will serve as the Clan's future medicine cat. Am I clear?"

Blackberrypaw sniffed, her nose in the air as she stormed out of the den, claws scraping against the stone as she left. Lilyrose watched her go as she tried to calm down, glaring down at her paws, hating that she yelled at Blackberrypaw.

She headed out of her den, wanting to find her apprentice and apologize but she was nowhere in sight. Alarm shot through Lilyrose as she realized the camp was bare other than Iceleaf and a few warriors and the kits in the nursery.

"Lilyrose?" Iceleaf limped out of the elder's den, green eyes questioning. Her tattered left ear twitched as she approached the medicine cat. "Who are you looking for?"

"Blackberrypaw," she replied, scanning the den entrances. "Have you seen her?"

Iceleaf nodded, pointing her tail to the camp entrance. Ice engulfed her heart as she knew what the elder was going to say. "She went after the battle patrol." The she-cat sat down and scratched her ear with her hind paw. "She was talking about proving herself to you."

Lilyrose felt the claws of guilt grip her heart and she dashed away from the elder, her throat closed with fear. She burst through the thorn tunnel, paws thrumming against the forest floor as she pelted through the trees, following the patrol's scent. *Oh StarClan, please don't let her be there already.*

She hopped over a boulder and skidded to a halt as she mentally cuffed her ears. *I should never have yelled at her.* Lilyrose set off again, her throat burning. *I'll scold her, apologize, and make sure she's okay before scolding her again.* She came upon the stream parting OakClan's forest with GlacierClan's moor and rivers. Her paws splashed in the water as she fought her way through, the water lapping steadily at her belly fur.

Lilyrose saw the paw prints of the patrol on the ground, wet and leading up the slope and deeper into GlacierClan's territory. Taking a deep breath, she followed the tracks and broke into a run toward the hill the GlacierClan camp resided on.

She smelled the blood before she heard the fighting. Her breath came in gasps as she fought her way up the incline and burst into the rather large camp. She held back a wail as she spotted bodies strewn across the ground. Relieved that most just seemed injured, but some others were limp and lifeless.

A light brown tabby shape was on the ground, blood pooling around it. She hurried to the cat and bit back a horrified shriek, stumbling back. It was Songscratch. His neck was slashed open, eyes wide and staring sightlessly at the pale sky.

Lilyrose shook her head and lifted her head, searching the wrestling warriors for her apprentice. Weight slammed into her back and she let out a yelp. She hit the ground and felt claws dig into her flesh, drawing blood.

"Pathetic," spat her attacker, who she knew was a tom by the sound

of his voice. He pushed her muzzle into the ground, making her wince. "You call yourself a warrior? You're as blind as a kit."

Lilyrose wrenched her head around and glared up at the tom. "I'm not a warrior," she spat back. She saw his amber eyes widen and she writhed under his grasp. "I'm a medicine cat, you mouse-brain. Let me up."

The tom let her go and took a few steps back. "What are you doing here?" He demanded and Lilyrose narrowed her eyes, recognizing the tom as Cedarpelt.

Lilyrose scrambled to her paws, wincing when the areas Cedarpelt's sharp claws dug in stung. "I'm looking for my apprentice." She meowed and twitched her ear. "Where is Froststar?"

Cedarpelt huffed. "Why are you looking for that piece of crow-food?" He snorted, his tail lashing back and forth. "Last I saw, she was fighting with Sparrowstar and Darkeyes."

"Did she have any help?" Lilyrose asked, frantically trying to scan the battle to see Blackberrypaw. "And have you seen a gray-and-white cat with green eyes?"

The large dark gray tom's white tail tip twitched as he watched her. "I saw the gray-and-white cat wrestling with Ashspots," he meowed, angling his ears to the far side of the clearing. "As for the help with Froststar, I think I saw that ginger-and-white tom run after her."

"That was Redstripe, then." Lilyrose quickly thanked the enemy warrior and bounded away, eyes searching each twisting cat. At once, she recognized Blackberrypaw's flashing green eyes as she lashed out at a gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes. "Blackberrypaw!" She yowled.

Her apprentice turned her head at the sound of her name. While she was distracted, the warrior she was fighting leaped onto her and threw her to the ground, a paw on her chest, holding her down.

"No!" Lilyrose's claws unsheathed as the she-cat lunged for her apprentice's throat, teeth bared. She hurled herself across the

GlacierClan camp and sprang, throwing Ashspots off Blackberrypaw. Lilyrose stood over her apprentice, hissing and spitting at the blue-eyed she-cat. "Get away from her, you flea-pelt! We're medicine cats!"

Ashspots growled in response. A cut on her forehead bled and Lilyrose felt a twinge of satisfaction that Blackberrypaw had managed to do something other than getting killed. "That little tick attacked me!" She snapped. "I was defending myself!"

Blackberrypaw hissed but Lilyrose flicked her tail over the apprentice's mouth. *Not the time for protesting, little one.* She thought grimly as she watched out of the corner of her eye as Dawnflame fell beneath the muscled bodies of Nutfur and Spiritsight.

"A real warrior doesn't lift a claw against a cat who speaks with StarClan." She retorted, her fur bristling as she slid out her claws. As though Ashspots could read her thoughts, the warrior leaped for her, yowling.

Lilyrose felt her instincts kick in as the time seemed to slow down. Leaning down, she grasped Blackberrypaw's scruff in her jaws and dodged to the right. She hissed in pain as the warrior's claws grazed her flank and she tossed her apprentice to one side. She faced Ashspots, tail lashing as she reared on her hind legs, paws flailing as the she-cat went for her again.

"Time for you to pay!" Screeched the warrior as she struck the medicine cat's cheek, spraying blood on the ground. Lilyrose yowled and clawed at the she-cat's chest, surprised when she drew blood. Blood roared in her ears as she dropped onto all fours and darted to the side before tackling Ashspots from the right. Together they rolled over each other, hissing and dealing blows too close to cause much damage.

This is wrong, her thoughts broke into her mind as she scored a blow across Ashspots' cheek. She sprang apart from the warrior and raced back to her apprentice, who was licking her wounds.

"Are you alright?" Lilyrose demanded, breathless as she checked Blackberrypaw for any serious injuries.

"I've never been better!" Her apprentice chirped, her eyes brighter than the sun. "That was awesome how you fought her off!"

"Fought me off?" Lilyrose nearly flattened the gray-and-white apprentice as she was thrown to the ground, pinned by Ashspots. Lilyrose twisted under her grasp and glared up at the warrior. "You OakClan cats think you're so high and mighty when you're really a bunch of weak mice."

Blackberrypaw fluffed up her fur, eyes nothing more than slits. "I'll show you a weak mouse!" She retorted, prepared to leap at the speckled she-cat.

"Don't," warned Lilyrose as she blinked painfully up at her apprentice. "You'll be ripped to shreds and your fur would be used to line this flea-pelts' nest."

"Shut up, medicine cat." Ashspots' claws dug into her head and her cheek, making blood dribble into her mouth. "By all means apprentice, try to fight me. See what happens."

Lilyrose shook her head at her apprentice, seeing her muscles tense beneath her thick fur. *I've got this,* she thought to herself as she turned her head and sank her teeth into Ashspots's thick-furred leg.

The warrior roared in pain, releasing her grip on Lilyrose as she stumbled back. Scrambling to her paws, Lilyrose spun around and slashed the she-cat's chest over and over until blood soaked her paw and the ground. *You're killing her!* The voice of her mother screeched in her ears as she froze, watching as Ashspots slumped to the ground, blood pouring from her chest.

Ashspots glared hatefully up at Lilyrose and Blackberrypaw as she tried to speak. She choked and with a final effort to keep her eyes open, she fell limp and her eyes glazed over.

I killed a cat. Lilyrose felt shock numb herself as she shook her head, curling her tail around Blackberrypaw and herd her away from the dead warrior.

"Lilyrose?" Blackberrypaw's voice was small as she looked up at her

mentor. "A-are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine," she lied and nosed her apprentice towards the camp entrance. "Get out of here and go back to camp. We'll talk later." Lilyrose turned to leave when her apprentice put a paw on her tail.

"Where are you going?" Blackberrypaw looked up at her, eyes wide. "Aren't you coming with me?"

Lilyrose felt touched but shook her head. "I'll catch up. I need to find Froststar and stop this." She touched her nose to Blackberrypaw's head and bounded away. Her wounds from fighting with Ashspots burned like fire and she tried not to think about the warrior falling to the ground before dying at her paws. *She nearly killed Blackberrypaw; a medicine cat apprentice.* She tried to convince herself. *I defended my apprentice.*

"P-Pikedive!" Sedgepelt's horrified mew startled Lilyrose and she turned her head to see the snowy she-cat backed against a boulder, fur fluffed up with blood splashed against it.

The tom glared at her, eyes sparkling with rage and hatred. "Why didn't you tell me you were expecting?" Lilyrose guessed Pikedive was the father of Sedgepelt's kits, seeing as he had a very similar body-type as the kits.

"Y-you said you didn't want kits," Sedgepelt whimpered, pressing herself against the stone to get as far away from the tom as possible. "I-I thought by raising them in OakClan, y-you'd move on."

Pikedive bared his teeth and Lilyrose tensed, prepared to bound toward the two and swipe the violent look off his face with her claws. "You think I'd move on because some she-cat had my kits? Grow up, Sedgepelt." He took a step toward her. "Because of you, my reputation in GlacierClan is gone. Because of you, I no longer have a life!" He sprang at her, claws outstretched.

Sedgepelt screeched as she was thrown to the ground. Pikedive scored his claws against her shoulder, hissing, and yowling as he kept her pinned to the ground. Blood dripped from his whiskers as it stained the she-cat's white fur scarlet. Lilyrose's paws felt rooted

to the ground, wanting to rip the tom from the helpless she-cat.

"Cats of OakClan!" The roar of Sparrowstar's voice made Lilyrose's fur bristle. She turned as Pikedive dove for Sedgepelt's throat, unable to bear the agony as the she-cats cry was cut short. Lilyrose heard a chorus of gasps from her Clanmates as the brown tabby leader threw the frosty-eyed leader in front of her.

Froststar's throat was slashed open, blood dripping from her fur. Lilyrose resisted the sudden urge to hurry to the leader's side and wake her. *But that wound won't allow her to wake.* A voice hissed in her mind, making her ears flatten. *It's way too deep and StarClan won't be able to heal it. Had Sparrowstar killed Froststar? Or had Darkeyes?*

"You killed her!" Shrieked Redstripe as he held Hailfrost up, propped on his shoulder as he gaped at his dead mate. "Murderer!"

Sparrowstar's lip curled into a vicious snarl that silenced the warrior. "She killed my most loyal of warriors." She angled her ears to where the body of a gray-and-white she-cat lay in the open. "Birdfoot didn't need to die because of your foolish leader."

Owlflight tried to lunge forward but was held back Meadowheart. "You killed my mother!" He yowled, claws digging into the ground. "You fox-hearted mange-fur!"

Lilyrose winced at the grief in his voice but held her ground. *How many times had Sparrowstar and Darkeyes killed Froststar? Once? Twice?* She shook her head and cleared her throat. "You've won the battle, Sparrowstar." She meowed, trying to keep her voice level. "You've made your point in killing our leader. We will leave you in peace now."

Sparrowstar lifted her chin, shoving Froststar's limp body away. "Get out of my camp." She ordered, her voice malicious. "Don't even think about coming back. Stormfern, Daisystep, and Perchwhisker make sure they leave."

***

Lilyrose dragged Frostar into the center of camp, sighing when she looked down at the dead leader. "You had many seasons of leading," she whispered, touching her nose to the leader's cheek. "May StarClan light your path." Pawsteps approached her and she looked up to see Redstripe. His head was bowed with his eyes fixed on his mate, grief, and outrage pouring into his voice.

"Now my kits have no mother to look after them." He meowed, glaring at Lilyrose. She knew he wasn't upset with her, but with GlacierClan. *Or is he mad at me for not convincing Frostar not to fight?* "How could this happen?"

Lilyrose sighed, her shoulders slumping. "She blamed Vixenpool's death on GlacierClan." She replied, her voice quiet. Redstripe's eyes widened and she went on. "She thought GlacierClan poisoned Vixenpool."

Shock rippled through Redstripe's body, making his fur bristle. "That's mouse-brained!" He exclaimed. "GlacierClan hasn't been near the camp!"

Lilyrose flicked his muzzle with her tail to quiet him. "I know. I tried to tell her that, but she ignored me." Her voice grew sad as she sighed. "I should've done more."

"Why didn't she listen to you?" Redstripe glanced at Frostar's body, his muscles rigid.

"She was ill," she replied earnestly. When Redstripe snapped his gaze to hers, she hurried on. "She refused to be treated and nearly clawed mine and Blackberrypaw's fur off when we went to see her." She hung her head in shame. "I should've done something to convince her."

To her surprise, Redstripe grazed his nose against her head. "She wouldn't have listened if you had." He meowed, his voice a low rumble in his throat. "I'm glad you tried." Rising to his full height, he turned away from his mate's body and sulked to the nursery.

Lilyrose heaved herself to her paws and headed for her den where she knew Blackberrypaw would be treating her Clanmates. When

she entered the cave, no other cat was inside other than her apprentice. Blackberrypaw was applying a goldenrod poultice to a bite on her right forepaw and wrapping it with cobwebs.

Her ear twitched as she heard her mentor come in. She turned, eyes bright. "I just got done helping Wildwing and Rowanflower with their wounds," she meowed cheerily. "Could you help me with mine?"

Lilyrose nodded stiffly and approached her apprentice, gathering some horsetail and chewing it into a pulp before spreading it on a scratch along her back. Blackberrypaw winced. "Why did you go after the patrol?" She asked, her voice neutral but low.

Blackberrypaw didn't falter as she replied, her voice cool. "Because I wanted to fight with my Clan and littermates," she answered. "Wouldn't you?"

"Not if it meant I'd lose my life," Lilyrose meowed, her voice curt. Blackberrypaw blinked at her, confused. "A medicine cat doesn't fight with their Clan. They stay behind in conflict and treat those who have been wounded."

Her apprentice's ear twitched as she snorted. "You fought off Ashspots," she pointed out. Lilyrose pictured the speckled warrior fighting for her Clan's safety, eyes ablaze with rage as Lilyrose struck her. She shook her head. "You learned how to fight."

"Because I grew up in a time when everything was about battle." Lilyrose meowed, her voice low as her muscles tensed. She remembered when she was an apprentice, learning how to fight because Nightstar had ordered it.

"If there are not injured cats," the black she-cat had said moons before she died, "then why not teach them how to shred their enemies? They could be more useful."

Lilyrose shook out her pelt, dislodging the memories of the dark leader's malicious ideas. "If one of us gets killed in battle, what will happen? What if we both are killed? Our Clan is without a medicine cat." She fixed Blackberrypaw with a hard stare. "I don't want to

hear another peep of this, understand? There's no point in arguing when what's been done before failed." Rising to her paws, she angled her ears to Blackberrypaw's nest. "Rest. I'm going to take Goldenfire to the Moonpool for his nine lives. If a cat has an issue, take care of them."

Blackberrypaw nodded, yawning. "Okay."

"And don't think you won't be punished for your little stunt," Lilyrose added, her voice stern. Blackberrypaw looked up in shock, eyes as wide as a moon. "That's right. I'll decide what to do with you after I get back. Goodbye, Blackberrypaw. I'll be back in the morning." Without letting her apprentice argue or speak, she spun on her heels and exited her den without getting her injuries treated.

Chapter Seventeen

The full-moon glowed over Lilyrose's head as she padded side-by-side with Goldenstar, his shoulders tense. She glanced at the new leader, surprised when he saw a shadow over his green eyes. *What's he thinking about?* She wondered but didn't dare ask.

His deputy, Owlflight, strode on his right side. The tom's grief and anger about his mother's passing still showed in his holly-colored eyes as they headed down the slope toward the Gathering Hollow. The lake lapped at the sandy shore as they hopped on the fallen tree and cautiously crossed.

Lilyrose nudged Blackberrypaw ahead of her, making sure her claws were in the bark so she could cross safely before joining her apprentice. She debated whether or not letting her apprentice accompany her during the Gathering, but allowed her to go since she had never gone to one before.

When they headed into the thick outer ring of trees that surrounded the island, the scent of the Clans hit her like a wave as they neared the throng of cats. Lilyrose scented NightClan and DawnClan, but not GlacierClan. *Are they not going to show up after the battle?*

A cat's voice rang over the chattering of the Clans. "OakClan is here!"

Her Clanmates flooded by her in a blur as they mingled with the other Clans. She nearly fell over as her Clanmates pushed by. Blackberrypaw bounded forward, her eyes huge and tail bushed out. Lilyrose followed, tail twitching as she followed.

"Be careful," she heard Owlflight telling Yonderpaw behind her. "Don't say too much. There might be a truce, but tensions will be high because of the battle."

Blackberrypaw followed an invisible path along the edge of all the cats, Lilyrose in tow. She headed for the other medicine cats, her

ears flicking as she saw Shellfur, his apprentices, and Driftpaw. "Hi!" She meowed, her voice excited.

Sunnypaw bounded up to her, eyes wide. "Who are you?" She asked. Her tone wasn't rude, but curious. "I've never seen you before."

Blackberrypaw puffed out her chest, eyes glowing with importance. "I'm Lilyrose's new apprentice," she announced, looking over at her mentor as she joined her at her side.

Splashpaw bounded up to them, her eyes excited. "Really?" She gave a bounce of joy. "That's great!"

Driftpaw padded up to Blackberrypaw, his blue eyes thoughtful. "Welcome to the medicine cat group," he purred. His white tail tip twitched back and forth as he grinned at the new apprentice.

A call from Sneezesong echoed in the hollow. "GlacierClan is here at last!"

Lilyrose tensed as she turned her head and saw Sparrowstar leading her Clan into the hollow. Her Clan poured into the gathered cats, fur bristling and eyes narrowed as they didn't go near the OakClan cats. *They've got a grudge even though they won the battle.*

Shellfur leaned over and whispered in her ear. "What's up with GlacierClan?" He murmured.

Lilyrose chose not to answer as Sparrowstar joined the other leaders on the Great Oak and sat down with Squirrelstar. Goldenstar shot the she-cat a toxic glare but didn't say anything.

It was Pebblestar who yowled. "Cats of all Clans! Let this moon's Gathering begin!"

When the crowd of cats quieted down, Squirrelstar spoke. She looked at Sparrowstar, who was glaring ahead. "You arrived here last," she meowed, her voice neutral. "You must share your news first."

Sparrowstar nodded, but her shoulders were like spikes as she looked down at the cats. "Due to a raid on our camp by OakClan,

we have lost Ashspots and Birdfoot." She announced, her voice cold. "Other than that, Sorrelfur and Fawnstripe have given birth and their kits are doing great. GlacierClan has a new warrior among our ranks. Please welcome Talonclaw!"

A rumble of greeting went around the gathered crowd, but no cat said anything. Lilyrose dug her claws into the ground as her Clanmates' fur bristled.

Squirrelstar forced a purr of approval and Lilyrose held back a snort. Beside her, Driftpaw cast his gaze down at the ground. "I'll go next." She meowed. "We have two new warriors in our ranks. Please welcome Brightnose and Skiptail!"

"Brightnose! Skiptail!" Cheered the cats, much more accepting of the NightClan cats than Talonclaw, Lilyrose noted. She pushed it to the back of her mind and flicked her tail.

"I'll go next, if that's okay, Goldenfire." Meowed Pebblestar and looked across the hollow. "DawnClan has a whole bunch of new apprentices this moon. Welcome Acornpaw, Owlpaw, Eggpaw, and Palepaw!" When the cheers died down, he went on proudly. "Not only do we have new apprentices, but we also have new kits and two warriors. Please welcome Bumblefall and Berrystream as warriors!"

"Bumblefall! Berrystream!" Splashpaw called, louder than any other cat that Lilyrose could hear. *They must be her littermates.* Lilyrose figured.

Goldenstar cleared his throat and the clearing fell silent. "I have some sad news. Froststar walks with StarClan after being slain in battle." He shot Sparrowstar a glare before going on. "My name is Goldenstar and I have chosen Owlflight as my deputy. We also have a large batch of new kits and five new apprentices. Welcome Blackberrypaw, Whorlpaw, Riverpaw, Topazpaw, and Yonderpaw!"

"Owlflight! Blackberrypaw! Whorlpaw! Riverpaw! Topazpaw! Yonderpaw!"

"I believe this Gathering is at an end," Sparrowstar growled and rose

to her paws. "GlacierClan! We're leaving." Casting a final glare at Goldenstar, she leaped down from the branch and vanished into the shadows with her Clan in tow.

Squirrelstar shared a confused look with Pebblestar but shrugged. "NightClan! We're leaving." She announced and was swallowed by the bushes as she and her Clan left.

Driftpaw cast the other medicine cats an apologetic glance before bounding away after his Clanmates. His tail streamed after him as Sunnypaw and Splashpaw called their goodbyes.

"Lilyrose," a harsh mew came from behind her and she turned to see Emberburn standing a few mouse-lengths away. The medicine cat dipped her head to Shellfur and followed the tortoiseshell tom around a bramble bush.

"What do you want, Emberburn?" She asked, trying to steady the blood roaring in her ears and her heart pounding in her chest. "Now's not the time to be speaking when everyone is so tense."

"I know." The tom admitted and met her gaze. "You didn't show up at our meeting." Emberburn meowed, his voice casual but Lilyrose could see the raw pain in his heather-colored eyes.

Indignation flared up in Lilyrose. "I did," she retorted. "But I came across Adderseed and Amberheart getting all lovey-dovey before I could find you." Emberburn's eyes widened and she nodded. "They were all cuddled up together when I showed up. Amberheart is also expecting his kits and is about to give birth." She added.

Emberburn looked stunned as he stared at her, eyes wide like the moon. "That's insane," he whispered. He shook himself and built a barrier in his eyes that Lilyrose couldn't get through. "Anyway, will you meet me again?"

"Where?" She meowed, shocked that she wanted to meet the tom once more. *Get yourself together,* she scolded herself. *He's from a different Clan! And you're a medicine cat!*

"Why not by the stream that splits through the border?" The tom

suggested and twitched his whiskers. "It'd be better not to visit the same place over and over again, huh?"

Lilyrose felt her ear tips start to burn as she nodded. She heard her Clan leader's call and she whisked her tail, grateful for the distraction. "I'd better go catch up before Blackberrypaw misses me." She meowed, shocked at the reluctance in her voice. "Goodbye, Emberburn." Turning around, she hopped over the bramble bush and followed her Clanmates away from the Gathering Hollow.

***

"Lilyrose?" Blackberrypaw waved her paw in front of Lilyrose's face, snapping her out of staring into nothing. "Did you hear me?"

"Huh?" She looked at her apprentice as she realized she was in the nursery. Sprawled out in front of her was Amberheart, two kits wailing at the curve of her belly. Memories of what she as doing flooded into her mind and she quickly freed the third kit from the membrane around it and pushed it to Amberheart's muzzle.

Blackberrypaw continued to watch her closely as she left borage and burnet in the nursery before they both slipped out of the den. "What's going on with you?" Her apprentice asked quizzically. Her eyes were concerned and confused as she stared at her mentor. "You're never this distracted before. You've been acting weird since the Gathering."

Lilyrose shook herself and looked down at her apprentice. "I'm fine," she replied. "Nothing's wrong. Just a bit tired and hungry." She only half-lied. Prey was slowly coming back to the forest as leafbare's claws started to uncurl around the lake.

"We're all tired and hungry," Blackberrypaw responded, her voice unusually sharp. It surprised Lilyrose and she looked above her into the trees beyond the camp walls. "You've been so distracted that you tried giving a juniper berry to Swiftsoul when he complained that he couldn't sleep!"

Lilyrose flicked her ears at her apprentice. "There's nothing you should be concerned about." She meowed steadily. "I assure you

that I'm just thinking about other things."

Blackberrypaw's green eyes darkened and her voice lowered to a growl. "Thinking about Emberburn?" She challenged and Lilyrose suppressed a gasp.

"What are you talking about?" She stared at her apprentice as though she'd sprouted another head. "Why would I think about a DawnClan cat?"

Her apprentice snorted. "Because you mutter his name in your sleep." She led the way into the medicine cat's cave and faced her mentor. "What's going on between you two? Are you in love?"

"Of course not," Lilyrose snapped, growing irritated and embarrassed. "Why would I be in love with a DawnClan warrior? Why would I be in love when I'm a medicine cat?"

Blackberrypaw narrowed her green eyes at her and Lilyrose felt her fur prickle with unease and worry. "Because you're a cat with feelings." Her voice was cool, as though she were struggling to contain her emotions. "Just because we're medicine cats doesn't mean we don't have feelings."

Lilyrose twitched her ear in annoyance. Why was her apprentice acting like she was older and more experienced than her? *Because she figured your secret out.* Whiteblaze's taunting mew rang in her ears but she ignored it. "I know that." She retorted, heading for her nest. "I'm not mooning over that piece of dung like you do with Driftpaw."

It was Blackberrypaw's turn to be embarrassed. "We just met!" She defended herself, cheeks flushing. "Besides, we're apprentices. Why would we become mates so young?"

"It's been done before," Lilyrose mewed and curled in her nest, her tail flicking over her nose. "Not another word of this or I'll keep you from going to every meeting." While she was only partly teasing, she enjoyed seeing Blackberrypaw gape at her before curling in her nest.

The thought struck her like a blow and she jerked her head up with a start. *Do I love Emberburn?* She shook her head. *Of course not, he's a rival warrior. Besides,* she thought to herself. *We're only meeting as friends.* Her heart skipped a beat as another question crowded her mind. *Right?*

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Tall Tree for a Clan meeting!" Goldenstar's voice rang through the camp as night fell. Lilyrose glanced up at the tom, her mouth full of a bite of mouse. Gulping the rest of the fresh-kill down, she padded to the entrance of her den and settled down next to her apprentice.

"Are Froststar's kits becoming apprentices?" Meowed Riverpaw as she leaned over to whisper in Whorpaw's ear.

Her littermate shrugged, his claws digging into the ground. "Maybe we're becoming warriors." He guessed.

His mentor, Rowanflower, turned around and flicked their ears sternly with her tail. "Not if you're chattering before your leader is about to speak." She meowed, her voice sharp.

Riverpaw ducked her head, but her eyes burned with eagerness as she stared up at Goldenstar, her tail twitching in excitement.

The large leader blinked down at his Clanmates. "I have only one announcement for this meeting," he meowed and Lilyrose pricked her ears. "Redstripe has asked me to move into the elder's den. And, I have agreed."

Redstripe rose to his paws and the cats around him gasped in disbelief. He lifted his chin, staring each of his Clanmates in the eyes without flinching. "I have served my Clan for many moons," he meowed, his voice strong. "With Froststar's death, I have realized how much I miss living in peace. I no longer want to fight and hunt for my Clan. Instead, I want to relax and watch my kits grow up without fearing if the next day will be my last." He let out a heavy sigh but kept his gaze level. "I'm honored to have served you all for this long."

Lilyrose raised her voice over the murmuring. "We all are grateful that you have served us and fought and hunt alongside us." She declared, her eyes warm as she looked at the tom. "May StarClan light your path, Redstripe."

Blackberrypaw nodded vigorously. "May StarClan light your path, Redstripe!" She meowed, her voice cheery.

Goldenstar flicked his tail for silence and the murmuring stopped. "Redstripe, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?" He asked, looking at the ginger-and-white tom.

Redstripe was quiet for a heartbeat and Lilyrose held her breath. *Would he change his mind and refuse?* He took a deep breath before responding. "It is, Goldenstar." His voice shook, but his eyes were bright.

The tabby leader twitched his tail and dipped his head to the warrior. "Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given us. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest." He meowed solemnly.

"Redstripe!" Lilyrose called.

"Redstripe! Redstripe!" The rest of the Clan joined in, and Lilyrose saw the relief on the young elders' face as he bowed his head. He spun around and joined Iceleaf by the bramble den.

"Meeting dismissed," Goldenstar meowed and made his way down the Tall Tree before going to speak with Owlflight.

"Wow," Blackberrypaw breathed, turning to look up at her mentor. "Redstripe must've been very brave to step down." She looked across the camp to the nursery where Pearpool was nosing her kits back inside. "How will he raise his kits?"

"In the safety of the camp," Lilyrose replied and twitched her ear. "Have you taken borage and burnet to Amberheart and Pearpool yet?" Part of Blackberrypaw's punishment was to handle the queens, kits, and elders until leafbare ended.

Blackberrypaw nodded. "Can we go do something other than

staying in camp all day?" She asked, eyes flicking to the camp entrance. "Can't we go into the forest?"

Lilyrose felt confusion cloud her mind. "Why? We have all the herbs we need in here." She flicked her tail into her den where the familiar scent of herbs was stronger than ever.

Her apprentice rolled her green eyes. "To have fun, of course!" Her eyes twinkled as she waved her tail.

Lilyrose scowled. "You aren't a kit anymore, Blackberrypaw." She meowed, her voice sharp.

"Neither are my littermates," her apprentice retorted. "But they can play in the snow. Why can't we?" Before Lilyrose could reply, Blackberrypaw bounded away towards the camp entrance.

Lilyrose rolled her blue eyes and followed reluctantly. "Don't be too reckless!" She called after her, ducking under the thorns as they raked through her thick fur. "You'll make Whorlpaw look timid!" Amusement rose in her throat as she watched her apprentice throw herself into a snowdrift, disappearing instantly.

Blackberrypaw popped her head up, snow dappling her pelt. She shook herself and Lilyrose bit back a laugh. "Come on!" She purred and dove back into the snow, making a flurry fly into the air.

Lilyrose sat down, her tail curling neatly over her paws as she watched her apprentice play. She felt her shoulders relax for the first time since she was an apprentice all those moons ago.

"Hey!" Swiftsoul's voice rang in her ears and she turned her head as the tom padded toward them with the apprentices in tow. "We were about to head on a patrol. What's going on?"

"Whorlpaw! Topazpaw! Riverpaw! Yonderpaw!" Blackberrypaw slithered out of the snow, shaking the white flakes from her thick pelt. "Come and play!" She urged.

Whorlpaw let out a shout and plunged into the snow, showering Blackberrypaw in the white powder as his littermates followed eagerly.

Swiftsoul watched in stunned silence as the apprentices threw snow at each other and scattered while yelping and laughing. "I forgot what it's like to be carefree," he murmured as he sat down next to Lilyrose. He leaned against her, making her stiffen.

"When was the last time we all were carefree?" She whispered as Blackberrypaw shoved Topazpaw into the snow and buried her. "Since everything's that happened, we don't remember the blissful days."

Swiftsoul glanced down at her. "What's been going on with you?" He asked, his voice gentle. Despite his soft voice, it sounded like he was screaming in her ears, and Lilyrose flinched. "I know something's on your mind. You have that look in your eyes when you think of something else."

"N-nothing's on my mind." She lied, forcing her eyes from meeting his and stared into the trees. "I'm just a bit busy."

"With what?" Swiftsoul snorted. "There are no queens about to kit, there are no battles, no cat injured. You have all the herbs you need to last the rest of leafbare." He dropped his mew to a whisper that ruffled her ear fur. "Something's going on in that pretty head of yours, I know it."

Lilyrose didn't answer as she sank into his fur, grateful that he didn't press any further. A small pang of sadness hit her as she looked into his hazel eyes. *The thing's I wish I could tell you, my friend.* She thought and let out a sigh. "Come on, Blackberrypaw." Her voice was half-hearted. "We've got to head back to camp before we freeze." Turning to Swiftsoul, she added. "I want to talk to you about certain things. But, they are the things a medicine cat like myself cannot share with a warrior." She rose to her paws and forced herself to pad away from his broken gaze.

Chapter Eighteen

Stempaw flattened himself to the ground as he snuck up on the blackbird. Unsheathing his claws, he sprang and killed the black-feathered bird before it could take off. Emberburn came out of the bushes, pride for his apprentice making a spring in his step.

"Great catch, Stempaw." He praised, watching as his apprentice swung around and beamed up at him. "Gather what you've caught and meet me back at camp. The other apprentices and mentors will be waiting."

Stempaw nodded and turned away, heading away to fetch his prey. Emberburn watched him go with pride pricking from every hair on his pelt. He felt amazed at how much his apprentice had grown since he became his mentor. From the days touring the forest and teaching him the hunting crouch, to the thrill of the skirmish with Maplewhisker that scared Ravenpaw to the core.

Branchstripe met him on the way and fell into step beside him, eyes glowing. "How did Stempaw do on his hunt?" The burly tabby tom queried.

Emberburn couldn't help but let a purr escape his throat. "He did great." He meowed, his tail kinked over his back until the tip brushed his ears. "He's a fantastic hunter. How did Ravenpaw do?"

The dark honey-brown tabby tom's ears drew back, but not in anger. Delight glittered in his dark blue eyes and it warmed Emberburn despite the cold that bit at his paws. "He did wonderfully. He caught so much prey, we will eat heartily tonight."

"Seems like the pair of you are getting along," purred an amused voice as Gingerheart met them at the camp's side entrance. The tom's eyes were glistening with pride. Emberburn recalled the birth of Mosspelt's kits, born a few sunrises after the Gathering. His heart ached as he remembered the OakClan medicine cat Lilyrose agreeing to meet him once more.

Branchstripe playfully nipped at Emberburn's ear, making him stifle a yelp of surprise. "Only for now," he teased before nodding to the bright ginger warrior. "How are your kits?"

Gingerheart looked as though he'd explode with delight. "They're doing amazing," he breathed and Emberburn purred happily. "They have names now."

Emberburn beat Branchstripe to the question. "What are their names?"

"Snowkit and Snakekit," Gingerheart replied, his chest puffing out. "They're so much like their mother."

Branchstripe rolled his eyes. "If they're anything like you," he prodded the ginger tom with a paw, "then they'll be just as cocky and boastful."

"Branchstripe!" Ravenpaw's voice startled the three toms and they looked up as the tom bounded towards them, eyes wide. "Where's Stempaw?" He turned his gaze on Emberburn. "Is he back yet?"

Emberburn touched the apprentice's shoulder with his tail tip. "He'll be back soon," he soothed. "What's the matter?"

Ravenpaw's eyes were bright and excited, the previous fear when Maplewhisker surprised the two brothers gone. "Pebblestar's hailed a meeting. I-I think it's time!"

Emberburn's eyes widened and he glanced over his shoulder worriedly. "Surely he can wait so Stempaw can catch up," he meowed, turning back to the apprentice.

The snowy tom bounced on his toes. "He'd better hurry up if he wants his warrior name." He meowed. He spun around and bounded toward Mistpaw and Boulderpaw with their mentors.

Gingerheart glanced apologetically at Emberburn before trotting away with his tail high, heading for the nursery where Mosspelt waited with her kits bundled in her tail.

Emberburn gulped as he and Branchstripe sat at the back of the

crowd and craned his neck to peer up at his leader. *Stempaw, hurry!* He willed his apprentice to hurry, wanting to dash into the forest and find the tom himself.

"Cats of DawnClan," Pebblestar meowed as he perched on the Jagged Stone, eyes bright. "I have gathered you all here to witness four apprentices becoming warriors. Mistpaw, Boulderpaw, Stempaw, and Ravenpaw, please come forward."

As three of the four apprentices padded towards their leader, Emberburn felt fur brush by him and he watched as Stempaw hurriedly joined his denmates at their side.

You've got this. Emberburn thought as he watched, pleased at his apprentice's rush.

Pebblestar raised his head to the cloudy sky and spoke aloud, his voice ringing through the bracken camp. "I, Pebblestar, leader of DawnClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

Branchstripe leaned over and whispered in Emberburn's ear. "I wonder what he'll name them."

Emberburn shrugged in response as he watched his leader and apprentice closely, paws itching.

"Mistpaw, Boulderpaw, Stempaw, Ravenpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your lives?" The tom asked, his voice powerful.

Mistpaw nodded, her eyes gleaming. "I do."

Boulderpaw puffed out his chest. "I do!"

Ravenpaw dug his claws into the ground. "I do."

Stempaw met his leader's gaze and Emberburn held his breath. "I do," he meowed strongly.

Pebblestar nodded. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you

your warrior names. Mistpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Mistflight. StarClan honors your wit and courage and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Mistflight!" Called the Clan as Pebblestar turned to Boulderpaw, who scuffed his paws anxiously.

"Boulderpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Bouldertalon. StarClan honors your ferocity and strength and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Bouldertalon!" The name felt strange on Emberburn's tongue, like it was awkward but he shrugged.

"Stempaw," the tortoiseshell tom tensed as his apprentice was addressed. "From this moment on you will be known as Stemfang. StarClan honors your eagerness and skill and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

Joy filled Emberburn as he raised his voice over his Clanmates. "Stemfang!"

"Ravenpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Ravenflame. StarClan honors your heart and care and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan." Pebblestar dipped his head. "Meeting dismissed."

"Ravenflame!" Cheered Branchstripe and Emberburn felt a jolt of joy as the Clan dispersed and he stepped forward to congratulate his former apprentice.

"Stemfang!" Mistflight padded up to the tom and butted her head against his, purring loudly. Emberburn felt his whiskers twitch in amusement as he pushed his way to his apprentice.

"Nice name," he praised as he nodded approvingly to Stemfang. His tail twitched as Mistflight jumped away from him and looked bashful. "When will you two have kits?"

Stemfang's eyes widened and he shoved Emberburn's shoulder with a paw. "We *just* became warriors!" He retorted, but his voice was

amused.

"Today couldn't have come quick enough," purred Snowshine as she and Lizardberry trotted towards them, their tails twined and fur brushing. She licked Stemfang on the head and shook her head at his protest. "I'm so proud of you and your brother."

Emberburn backed away and headed for the fresh-kill pile, belly growling. A flash of dark fur caught his eye and he watched as Patchsnow bundled out of the nursery, her eyes bright as she headed for the prey-pile, seemingly unaware of Emberburn. His heart skipped a beat as he watched her, moving gracefully with her paws hitting powerfully against the ground before making her surge forward.

"Staring at Patchsnow again, Emberburn?" Teased the voice of Hollyfire as she caught up with him. Her eyes twinkled as she looked from the dark-brown-and-white she-cat. "You two have been inseparable lately."

Emberburn fought back the embarrassment that lashed at his body as he turned to look at his sister. "Petaltail keeps putting us on the same patrols and hunting parties," he meowed, trying not to show how shy he was.

Hollyfire snorted, her green eyes doubtful. "If you say so." She remarked. "Do you want to hunt later?"

The tortoiseshell tom was too busy watching as Patchsnow snatched a sparrow from the prey-pile and headed toward the nursery. When the she-cat disappeared into the den, Emberburn shook his pelt and grabbed a vole for himself and a mouse for Hollyfire. Together, they settled under a pine tree and tucked in.

As he ate, he looked at his sister. "Have you seen Mosspelt?" He asked, his mouth full of the savory, delicious bite of vole.

Hollyfire bit into her mouse and chewed before answering. "I think she's been staying with her kits in the nursery." She meowed and nodded to the den on the far side of the clearing. "Snowkit and Snakekit are already so big for being so young."

"She should come outside more often," the tom commented and took another bite. "After all, her kits can fend for themselves for a little while."

Hollyfire gave him a doubtful look. "You don't understand how hard it is for a mother cat to raise kits, do you?" She didn't give him time to reply as she went on. "It's hard to leave kits that so young, like Snowkit and Snakekit. You're always fearing what would happen to them if you closed your eyes for even a heartbeat." Her eyes drifted to the apprentice den where Russetpaw, Whiskerpaw, Deafpaw, and Acornpaw were sharing prey. "I thought I'd never see them grow into apprentices. But now," she looked back at Emberburn, "I'm proud that they've proven they're strong."

Emberburn looked at his vole, suddenly concerned that his kin wouldn't live to warriorhood. He forced himself to take another bite and nearly choked as he swallowed. "When will they become warriors?"

Hollyfire shrugged. "That's not for me to decide. I only hope that Deafpaw wouldn't get into too many battles as a warrior." Her eyes grew sad and he knew that she was thinking about Deafpaw. The apprentice would be an apprentice far longer than his hearing littermates, that wasn't clear enough. But what would he do if he got tangled into a battle? "Anyway," she went on, her voice brisk. "Do you want to go hunting later?" She repeated, her eyes dark.

Emberburn flicked his ear as he saw Petaltail head their way. "I think our dearest deputy has the answer," he meowed and nodded to the calico tabby.

Petaltail twitched her whiskers in amusement but didn't comment. "OakClan has been scented crossing the border," she told them and Emberburn's ears went up in surprise. *But, OakClan hasn't tested the border since the last battle. Why would they want to start a fight now?* Petaltail narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at him as though she could read his thoughts. "We don't know why they're suddenly pushing the border. It's better that we don't ask. But I want you, Bumblefall, Berrystream, and Fallingash to head over and check it out."

Emberburn nodded and looked at his sister, who was staring into

nothing as she prodded her mouse with a forepaw. He dipped his head to Petaltail and headed to meet up with Fallingash, who was already at the camp entrance. When he met up with the she-cat, she gave him a distrustful look, her tail curling over her back.

"If you have something to say," he growled as he sat down, "then say it and not be a coward." Emberburn glared at the cream tabby warrior, lip curling. *Calm yourself,* his mother's voice rang in his ears and it made him jump. *She's your Clanmate.*

Pawsteps approaching them dissolved the tension that was thick in the air as Bumblefall and Berrystream, two recently named warriors, joined them.

"Are we waiting for anyone else?" Berrystream asked. Reaching over his shoulder, he bit at his side until he shook himself like a dog.

Emberburn wrinkled his nose, his mood dampened. "No," he meowed, his voice sharp. "Let's go." Whipping around, he slapped Fallingash with his tail and stalked out of the camp, the rest of the patrol lingering before following.

***

Emberburn sniffed at the bushes that reeked of OakClan scent and marked the border, covering the foul odor with his own. "Are you done over there?" He called to Bumblefall as she rubbed herself against the trunk of a large oak tree.

"Just about done!" She called back as she marked the tree and padded over. "When will OakClan realize they don't own everything that's in their sight?" She groaned, glaring across the border into the endless woods.

Emberburn snorted. "Never." He meowed and turned around, spotting Berrystream and Fallingash. "Are you done?" He called, trying his best not to sound impatient. His paws itched to see Lilyrose, which wouldn't happen for close to a moon. The Gathering had made his mind foggy with the pretty medicine cat. He couldn't help but be proud of her when he found out from Shellfur that she

had a new apprentice.

Beside him, Bumblefall hissed a warning. "Do you smell that?" She tasted the air and tensed. Emberburn kinked his tail questioningly, touching the she-cat's shoulder but she jerked away. "OakClan cats! It's fresh!"

Anger bubbled in his belly as he tasted the air. She was right. "Berrystream! Fallingash!" He yowled, fur starting to bristle as he spun around, eyeing the trees suspiciously as though an OakClan patrol would burst through and swarm the small border patrol.

"We heard your call," mewed Berrystream from behind him, sounding irritated and confused. "What's got your tail in a twist?" He scanned the trees and his tail lashed. "OakClan."

"Fresh, too." Agreed Fallingash with a growl. "I think we should report back to Pebblestar. He'll know what to do with Goldenstar's fluff-brained warriors." As she turned to go, a threatening snarl came from the far trees.

"I don't think so, Fallingash." Snarled a painfully familiar voice and Emberburn tensed, watching as Swiftsoul, Wolfstripe, Graywolf, and a black tom slid out of the trees. "Running away from a good fight? It seems exactly like what a DawnClan warrior would do. Isn't that right, Graywolf?"

The gray she-cat narrowed her eyes at Emberburn. "That's right, Swiftsoul." She hissed. "Look at who it is. The traitor's son has shown his ugly face once more."

"I could make that face uglier than mine," Emberburn retorted, anger pulsing through him as well as something else. Something darker and more sinister. His claws unsheathed and he lashed his tail. "Come over here and I'll blind you in both eyes."

Wolfstripe curled his lip and his blue eyes glinted as he drew himself up. "Let's try that, shall we?" He growled and cleared the border in one stride, crashing into Emberburn as his Clan overwhelmed the DawnClan patrol.

Emberburn was thrown onto his back, kicking snow into the air as Wolfstripe clawed relentlessly at his chest, ripping out clump after clump of his tortoiseshell pelt. Emberburn yowled in anger more than pain and sank his claws into Wolfstripe's shoulders and sank his teeth into the side of his neck.

Wolfstripe grunted in response and fastened his teeth into Emberburn's throat. As teeth pierced his neck, Emberburn heaved the tom harshly to the left and the tom stumbled, tripped over Emberburn, and fell onto his side. Emberburn gasped for breath, rolled over, and jumped to his paws. Seeing Wolfstripe struggle to get up, he took the chance and bowled him over and sent him tumbling into the grass as he slashed his shoulder.

"Emberburn!" Berrystream's cry of fear snapped his head around to see Graywolf battering his ears, flicking blood on the ground while the new warrior failed to defend himself.

Emberburn unsheathed his claws and ran to his Clanmate. He sank his teeth into Graywolf's shoulder and ripped her away from Berrystream. Graywolf lashed out with a paw and raked his muzzle and wrenched free from Emberburn's grasp.

Claws raked his back and Emberburn let out a shriek, releasing Graywolf as Swiftsoul bit his shoulder and rolled him onto his back, swiping at his belly. Blood stained his paws as Emberburn yowled in agony.

"Nightstar's kit feels pain?" Swiftsoul growled in Emberburn's ear as he clawed at his back. "Shocker." Emberburn wrenched his head around, throwing the OakClan tom off-balance and blindly lashed out. Swiftsoul let out a gurgling screech and Emberburn realized he'd scored his throat.

"Swiftsoul!" The black tom darted to his side as the black-and-white tom staggered and nearly fell. "OakClan, retreat!" He yowled. Supporting Swiftsoul on his shoulder, he staggered over the border with his Clanmates hurrying after him.

Emberburn watched them go with a flick of his tail. Pain exploded in his body as his wounds made themselves known and he

staggered, falling onto his side. In an instant, Fallingash was at his side, propping him up on her shoulder as she led him away from the border. Emberburn's eyes started to close and his paws felt heavy, dragging him to the ground with a *thump*. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of black fur and amber eyes. Then, his eyes closed and he saw no more.

***

Emberburn opened his eyes to find himself in a meadow that glowed with stars. He scrambled to his paws and stared around as he saw cats playing, hunting, and chatting together. He padded toward a group of cats laying in the warm sun as they shared tongues. "Hello?" He called.

A shimmering dark brown tabby she-cat with white paws looked up at him. Her yellow eyes widened and she nudged the tom next to her, a ginger tabby tom with amber eyes. "Look at this, Flameclaw." She meowed, her voice amused and slightly teasing. "What are you doing here?"

Flameclaw glanced up at Emberburn and his tail twitched in annoyance. "Looks like he's lost," the tom observed. Flameclaw looked him up and down and flicked his ear to the far meadow. "If you're looking for Thorntail, he's over there with Halfsnow."

Emberburn's throat tightened at the mention of his father and he dipped his head to the two cats before padding toward the golden tabby fur of his father. Thorntail was chattering with a golden-brown tabby she-cat, her yellow eyes were humored, but something dark lurked beneath their sunny depths. "T-Thorntail?" He rasped, suddenly nervous to meet his father.

Thorntail turned his head and his blue eyes widened with shock as his gaze swept over his kit. Emberburn felt his fur prickle with unease as he took a small step back, unsure whether or not his father was glad to see him. *Is he proud of me?* His throat was closed as he tried to speak, but it came out as a choke.

The golden-brown tabby she-cat looked at him in shock, her mouth gaping. She didn't say anything, but she nudged Thorntail, silently

encouraging him to speak.

"Father," Emberburn choked out, finding his voice. His paws scuffed against the ground as he wondered what he could say. What would he say? He'd never met his father and didn't know he looked like *this*. "I-I..." He trailed off, not knowing what to say.

"A-are you Emberburn?" Thorntail meowed, his voice tight with emotion. At his son's nod, his blue eyes widened in shock. The golden tabby tom padded around him, eyes taking in his kit. "You've grown so much..." he murmured, his voice soft. "How old are you now?"

Emberburn shifted his paws, feeling suddenly awkward and hesitant in front of his father. "One season cycle," he replied, paws fidgeting as his father let out a shaky sigh.

"Wow..." Thorntail's eyes swept across his shoulders, broad and powerful. "You've got my shoulders." He said, his voice sounding breathless. As his gaze traveled from his shoulders to his paws and finally to his eyes, pain lit in his blue optics. "You're eyes. They're purple."

Irritation prickled his pelt and Emberburn twitched his tail. "Yeah, they're a mix of yours and Nightstar's." He explained as though he were talking to a new apprentice fresh out of the nursery.

"What about your sisters?" His father prompted, his eyes glistening with sadness and joy. "What are their eyes and pelts?"

"Er," Emberburn hesitated. "Hollyfire is a red tortoiseshell with green eyes, like holly." As he described his sister, the golden-brown she-cat's ears twitched. "And Mosspelt is gray-and-white with orange-amber eyes."

Thorntail dropped his gaze and studied his paws, pelt prickling with what looked like guilt. "I'm so sorry I left you," he meowed, his voice cracking with sorrow. "You and your littermates shouldn't have had gone through that."

Anger burst in his chest, and he let the words slip through his

mouth. "Through what? The anger and distrust of my Clanmates?" He shook his head as Thorntail looked up in shock. "You being there would've done nothing, even though it happened anyway." The bitterness that had clung to him for moons spilled out in his words, and he couldn't stop himself. "My littermates and I are stronger with the prejudice against us than if you were alive. It's good that you died." He added and saw his father flinch.

"It wasn't his fault," rumbled a voice behind him and he turned, startled as a light brown she-cat with lighter paws approached them, her eyes tender but stern. "Greencough overtook him and weakened him. Even so, he fought bravely and we're honored to have him among our ranks." The she-cat dipped her head to Thorntail and the tom shifted his paws, shuffling away.

"And you are?" Emberburn growled, his voice devoid of respect.

"Deerstar," the she-cat replied, her eyes sharp. "I was once the leader of OakClan when your mother was born." Her tail kinked to point at Thorntail as he joined the golden-brown tabby she-cat. "Walk with me."

Emberburn felt his fur bristle as he followed Deerstar through the meadow, claws unsheathed. *What does this cat want?* He wondered, slightly intrigued.

"I wanted to speak with you," Deerstar meowed, as though reading his thoughts. *About what?* "About a prophecy." She turned, nodding to an oak tree that shadowed a patch of grass. When they sat down, she faced Emberburn. "Are you aware of the Dark Forest?" Her voice was curt as she tipped her head to the far shadowy forest beyond the lush hunting grounds of StarClan.

Emberburn grunted, nodding stiffly. "Of course I do," he meowed. "My mother was sent there, remember?"

Deerstar ignored his jibe and twitched her whiskers. "The Dark Forest is rising, Emberburn." She warned, her voice growing dangerous. Emberburn stiffened as she leaned against him, his fur bristling. "You and your littermates must stop the Dark Forest. Your mother is training cats from all the Clans, and you need to stop

her."

Emberburn's purple eyes widened in shock and disbelief. "What are you talking about?" He leaped to his paws, scrambling away from the she-cat. "My mother trains no cat!"

Deerstar held his gaze steadily. *"Only the holly's fire, the growing moss, and burning of ember can destroy the night."* She growled and Emberburn felt the ground beneath him disappear as he was plunged into darkness, yowling, and screeching.

***

"Emberburn!" The tom lifted his head, his fat squirrel dangling from his jaws. As the days rolled into newleaf, the forest was bursting with healthy prey and it seemed to fall into the DawnClan warrior's paws. "Come here!"

Emberburn quickly buried the squirrel and followed his Clanmate's call and came upon Gingerheart and Stoneblaze standing over a killed rabbit. He followed their eyes to the fluffy white body. Its neck had bite marks and it reeked of NightClan, making his fur bristle. "NightClan's been killing our prey," he growled.

Stoneblaze nodded angrily, his ears flattening. "We should find that patrol and shred them!" He declared, glaring around at his hunting patrol.

Gingerheart waved his tail, eyes flashing. "We should wait and get more warriors," he suggested, but Emberburn and Stoneblaze shook their heads.

"There's no use," spat Emberburn as he kicked the rabbit's limp body. He turned his angered glare to the far marshes of NightClan's territory. "We should go now before they get far." Emberburn glanced at Stoneblaze, who was nodding. Gingerheart looked skeptical but nodded in reluctant agreement. "First, let's bury our prey and get some more warriors." He added.

Gingerheart twitched his tail. Leading the way toward the camp, Emberburn looked over his shoulder at where the rabbit lay and felt

anger rise in his chest, nearly making him burst out with a snarl.

NightClan thinks they can do whatever they want, he thought crossly. *They're wrong! We'll show them.* Emberburn narrowed his eyes as he tasted the air. The usual refreshing scents of the forest wreathed around him but something saltier landed on his tongue and he stopped.

Stoneblaze bumped into him and let out an irritated hiss that was cut short. "Do you smell that?" He meowed to Gingerheart as he sniffed the air.

Gingerheart looked over his shoulder and halted, scenting the air. The fur on his neck began to bristle and Emberburn wondered if it would stay like that the more it bristled. "Blood!"

Emberburn took off past Gingerheart and he ran toward the camp. As they neared the bramble-ringed camp, yowls and screeches echoed in Emberburn's ears. "The camp's under attack!" He hissed over his shoulder as he veered sharply to the left, nearly slipping on the wet leaves. Bursting into the camp, he saw his Clanmates tangled with NightClan's warriors.

Fennelfur was wrestling with Sneezesong, the NightClan deputy, at the entrance of the nursery while her kits, Rootkit and Orchidkit, watched in silent horror. Also at the nursery were Coppersight and Snowshine, battling Firestripe and Fawnpelt as they tried to get inside.

A cry from the medicine cat's cave brought Emberburn back to the present and he took off to the cave, claws unsheathed. "Shellfur!" He yowled, exploding inside and wildly looking around. To his horror, Sunnypaw and Splashpaw were cornered by Shadowstream while Shellfur lay unmoving on his side.

Letting out a roar of fury, Emberburn flung himself toward Shadowstream and tore him away from the two apprentices. His claws ripped at his fur as he threw his weight to the side. Shadowstream let out a yelp as his shoulder connected with the stone floor with a *crunch!* Emberburn put a paw on the tom's left forepaw and raked his face with his claws.

Blood sprayed the stone as Shadowstream hissed in pain, paws flailing wildly. His claws caught Emberburn's belly and he shoved the DawnClan tom away, scrambling to his paws. Emberburn snarled, standing between the warrior and the two medicine cat apprentices, tail lashing.

Emberburn lunged for the tom, snapping his jaws around Shadowstream's forepaw and twisting, sending the tom crashing to the ground with a yowl. Shadowstream's claws sliced through his fur, ripping at his shoulders. Pain flared in his neck as Shadowstream slashed his throat. Blood flowed effortlessly down his chest as he choked, the crimson substance bubbling at his lips.

He released the tom and staggered, watching as the smaller warrior scuttled out of the den. A dull ache grew behind his ears and eyes as he lost his footing and fell. At once, Sunnypaw and Splashpaw clustered around him, their eyes wide with horror.

"Get cobwebs!" Splashpaw ordered the younger apprentice as she planted her paws on the warrior's throat, pressing down. Emberburn barely heard her. He coughed, making blood splatter against the gray stone floor of the den. The blackness that gathered at the back of his eyes called to him and he started to close his eyes, longing for sleep.

Sunnypaw's forepaw hit his cheek and he jerked, eyes widening. "Keep your eyes open," she ordered as she gave cobwebs and herbs to Splashpaw. Her eyes glowed with fear as she kept hitting him to keep him awake. Paws at the entrance of the den made Emberburn wearily flick his eyes to see who was at the mouth of the cave.

It was Pebblestar. His throat was badly bitten and he bled from a gouge on one side. His robin-egg eyes widened in shock as he stumbled forward, claws scraping against the ground. "NightClan has retreated," he croaked and Emberburn let out a weak cough. "Petaltail is dead."

Sunnypaw whipped her head around to stare with wide eyes at her leader, jaws open in a soundless gasp. "But she was doing fine!" She protested.

Pebblestar lowered his gaze to stare at Emberburn. "Palepaw didn't manage to fight off an apprentice." He meowed, his voice low with quiet outrage that they'd lost two cats. He jerked his muzzle to Emberburn. "What happened to him?"

It was Splashpaw who answered, her voice tight with grief. "He-he fought off Shadowstream when he killed Shellfur." She nodded to her mentor, who was lying in a pool of his blood. "Shadowstream slashed Emberburn's throat."

Pebblestar's eyes hardened with anger. "I'll flay that cat's flea-bitten skin!" He declared, turning to leave when Sunnypaw stopped him.

"You aren't going anywhere," she retorted and blocked his way out of the medicine cat's den. Though he towered over the apprentice, Emberburn hazily saw his leader nod reluctantly. "Lie in a nest and wait until we're done with Emberburn."

Emberburn tried to speak. "I-I'm fine," he rasped, but his throat hurt and it felt like he was being torn apart.

Splashpaw gave him a scolding look. "We'll be the judges of that," she retorted hotly as she pressed more cobwebs into his throat. "I think you'll be fine." Nosing him to his paws, she supported his weight and guided him to the nest Pebblestar was sitting in, tail twitching impatiently.

Sunnypaw turned around and headed out of the den. "I don't see any other cats that are badly wounded." She reported, turning back to Splashpaw. "How bad are Pebblestar's wounds?" She asked, trotting towards the leader, her head and tail high.

Splashpaw flicked her tail as she pressed cobwebs onto the leader's shoulder. "Not bad, but he definitely lost a life." She turned her head to look at Emberburn, who was settling into the nest. "How do you feel?"

"As well as you can be after nearly dying," Emberburn retorted, his throat dry and crackling. "C-can I have some water?"

Splashpaw flicked her ear to Sunnypaw and the younger apprentice

disappeared out of the den. "At least your humor is still in check." She joked, nodding to the tom.

Pebblestar glanced at him out of the corner of his blue eyes. Emberburn squirmed uncomfortably and he fluffed up his fur, despite the warm air that reeked of blood. The leader dropped his head and he stared at his paws. "Who will I choose as deputy in Petaltail's place?" He murmured, almost to himself. "She was a great deputy."

Emberburn didn't reply as Sunnypaw returned with dripping wet moss. She put a bundle of it in front of him before giving the other bundle to Pebblestar. As he lapped gingerly at the moss, his mind wandered if any other cats had been killed in the battle. Looking over at Shellfur's motionless body, he spoke. "Who else died in the battle?" He rasped, wincing at the pain in his voice.

Pebblestar's eyes darkened with fury. "I saw Firestep not moving by the elder's den." He curled his lip in anger. "Those NightClan cowards would attack a den full of helpless elders than a warrior trained for battle."

Splashpaw's eyes flashed as she touched her tail to his uninjured shoulder. "They'll be time for vengeance yet," she said, her voice tainted with a warning. "NightClan has wounded us too much for us to launch into another battle."

Pebblestar eyed the she-cat warily before dropping his eyes. "I suppose," he sighed.

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Pebblestar's yowl roused Emberburn from his fitful sleep, bleary-eyed from his nap. His throat felt like it was on fire and his muscles ached from his fight with Shadowstream.

Splashpaw looked up from where she was washing her thick fur. "Come on," she meowed, nudging his shoulder. "I know you're wounded, but this is serious." Propping him up on her sturdy

shoulder, Emberburn limped out of the den and sat down with a grunt outside the mouth of the cave.

Pebblestar's tail was lashing back and forth, eyes sparkling with rage and grief. "NightClan's warriors have taken many of our warriors, including Petaltail and Palepaw." The clearing fell silent at the mention of the deputy and apprentice. Emberburn felt a pang of grief as he lowered his ears. He and Stemfang had found Palepaw in the forest that leafbare. It was a shame that he'd died before becoming a warrior of DawnClan. "I say these words before the spirits of our fallen warriors, so they may hear and approve of my choice. Emberburn will be the new deputy of DawnClan!"

Chapter Nineteen

Emberburn twitched his ear in irritation as Acornpaw glared at him, her tail curled in annoyance. Her chestnut fur was bristling, her fluffy tail bushed out to twice its' size. "I've told you," he repeated, trying hard to keep his temper in check. "Patchsnow is too tired to take you out training today. She was on the dawn and night patrol yesterday, remember? She deserves her rest."

Acornpaw scoffed, her claws plucking at the ground. "But it's not fair!" She protested, her tail lashing to and fro. "I wanna go hunting!" Emberburn let out an exasperated sigh. In the two days since NightClan attacked and he'd been named DawnClan's new deputy, he'd spent every free heartbeat resting in Splashnose's den. Along with being named deputy, Splashnose was given her full name by Pebblestar.

Emberburn wanted to claw the apprentice's ears off. *Control yourself, deputy.* He hissed to himself and forced his fur to lie flat. "If you want to get out of camp that badly," he meowed at last as he saw Mistflight and Stemfang leaving the warrior's den. "Then go hunting with Mistflight and Stemfang." Raising his voice, he called to the two warriors. "Mistfilght! Stemfang!"

Stemfang's ears pricked as the pair approached the deputy and apprentice, their fur brushing. "What's up?" The ginger-and-white pointed tabby tom prompted.

"Could you two take this mousebrain hunting?" He flicked his ears to Acornpaw, who was washing her claws. "She's chattered my ears off."

Mistflight gave a stern look to the apprentice, who shrank under her stare. "You know better than pester the new deputy," she meowed, her voice firm. Turning her head to Emberburn, she added. "Of course we can take her hunting. With newleaf in the air, we need all the prey we can get."

Stemfang nodded and Emberburn felt a grateful purr rise in his throat. "I'll show you how to catch a bird in mid-air," he meowed, winking at Acornpaw. The apprentice's ears pricked with interest and Mistflight glared at Stemfang, amusement glimmering in her eyes.

Emberburn touched the tom's shoulder with his forepaw and nodded to the two she-cats. "You two go ahead," he told them. "I want a word with Stemfang." When the two she-cats headed for the camp entrance, his former apprentice looked at him questioningly.

"What's the matter?" Stemfang queried. "Is there something wrong?" His tail tip twitched back and forth and Emberburn shook his broad head.

"Of course not," he rumbled and sent a glance after Mistflight. "Are you two mates yet?" He prompted and Stemfang's eyes widened. Hastily, he added. "It's not a bad thing, but you're very young. Just out of the apprentice's den."

Stemfang's ear twitched. "Of course we aren't mates," he rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I know Mistflight likes me, but I don't like her in that way." His ears lowered as his eyes strayed away from Emberburn's.

Emberburn followed his gaze and was shocked when they rested on Berrystream, who was talking with Bumblefall. *He likes toms,* he thought, head whirling as he looked back to Stemfang. His former apprentice was staring at his paws, shame radiating off his pelt. "Hey," he touched his tail to his shoulder comfortingly. "It's alright. Tell Mistflight you'd be better off as friends."

Stemfang's eyes lit up with relief as he pushed himself to his paws. "Thank you, Emberburn!" He meowed, eyes shining with admiration. "I will!" Spinning around, he bounded out of the camp after Mistflight and Acornpaw.

Emberburn chuckled, his eyes following the tom until his tail disappeared out of sight. His paws tingled as he thought of Lilyrose, and meeting her as soon as the Gathering came next moon. Then, his mind drifted to Swiftsoul and the OakClan patrol that had

crossed the border before Emberburn became deputy. His paws suddenly felt rooted to the ground as he remembered the horrible wounds Swiftsoul had gotten during the battle. *I hope he's okay,* he thought with a shaky sigh.

"Hey, Emberburn!" He jumped at Mosspelt's call and he turned, partly surprised she was talking to him and partly surprised she'd left her kits.

"Mosspelt." He dipped his head to his sister, not forgetting the painful words the last time they spoke. He tried his best not to look awkward, but inwardly he groaned. "What can I do for you?"

He realized with a shock that his sister looked more energetic than usual. Her fur nicely groomed like normal, but her eyes were bright and blazing with joy and determination. *Having kits really has changed her.* Emberburn blinked. Mosspelt scoffed and nudged him playfully. "Have you seen Gingerheart? He hasn't seen Snowkit and Snakekit today."

Emberburn cleared his throat and shook his head, tail tip twitching back and forth. "I think he went on a solo hunt," he nodded to the camp entrance. "He'll be back." Turning to his sister, he added. "How are they?"

Mosspelt's eyes brightened as she rambled on and on about how great Snowkit and Snakekit were being. She talked about how big they were getting despite being so young. Their ears were unfolding and they were being a bit more mobile, even without their eyes open.

As his sister talked, his mind wandered out of the confines of the camp and into the Dark Forest. He pictured his mother's small shape ordering wrestling cats to be harder and to strike their opponents with their claws unsheathed.

He shivered as he recalled the night-black pelt and flashing amber eyes when his patrol retreated from fighting OakClan. *Had Nightstar forced the attack?* He thought, claws pricking the ground as both sides of his head had a battle. *Of course, she wouldn't! She wouldn't put her friends and kits in danger.* The right side of his head said.

Even if she did, the left side retorted, *explain her dragging us to the Dark Forest!*

"Shut up," he hissed aloud, shaking his head. Beside him, Mosspelt stopped mid-sentence and looked at him in surprise. Raising his paw, he rubbed his ears as though he could silence the argument in his head. Looking up at his sister, he muttered. "Sorry. Not you."

Mosspelt's face twisted into a confused frown before getting to her paws. "Well," she meowed, her voice awkward and confused. "Snowkit and Snakekit are probably waking up now. Bye, Emberburn."

Emberburn murmured a farewell to his sister and sadly watched her hurry back to the nursery with a sigh. "Great," he grumbled and struck the ground with his claws, leaving shallow claw marks in the ground. "I scared off my own sister with one word." Pushing himself to his paws, he hobbled across the clearing and stumbled unsteadily into Splashnose's den. As he sank into the nest, he let out a sigh and closed his eyes.

"Wake up!" Nightstar's paw jabbed his side and Emberburn jerked awake, eyes flying open. He looked up at his mother, still dazed as her tattered ears flicked. "Get up." She commanded and prodded his ribs again, making him hiss in discomfort.

Emberburn scrambled to his paws, anger flaring through him as he thought to the OakClan border. "You were there, weren't you?" He demanded, tail bushing out. "At the OakClan border. You watched my patrol fight OakClan."

Nightstar tipped her head to the side curiously. "How could you say that?" She meowed, her voice faking shock and hurt. "How could you accuse me of such a thing?"

Guilt pricked his paws but he didn't back down. "You watched and didn't do anything!" He began to pace in front of his mother, thoughts whirling. "How could you let my Clanmates be wounded without doing anything?"

Nightstar's amber eyes flashed and for a moment, Emberburn saw

anger burn in her gaze before they turned flat with no emotion. "I am dead," she replied stiffly, her tail twitching in irritation. "I can't interact directly with the living world."

"But you can show yourself in the forest," Emberburn flashed back at her. He dug his claws into the ground as he stood towering in front of his mother. He could hear shrieking and yowling beyond the dead trees. He shuddered.

Nightstar held his gaze, having to crane her neck in order to look into his purple eyes. "I can do many things," she meowed. "But there are also many things I cannot do." Pausing, she added with a wistful glance to her left. "Like cross the border into StarClan's hunting grounds."

Following her gaze, Emberburn saw the twisting trees and roots thin as they reached the blurred border. On the other side of the boundary, Emberburn recognized the lush meadows of StarClans hunting grounds. After a heartbeat, he turned back to his mother, neck fur bristling. "Why did you drag me here?"

Nightstar's ear flicked in surprise as she turned away, tail high. "Follow me." She ordered and began to push her way through the dead foliage. Emberburn quickly followed, confused, and slightly curious about what she'd show him.

"Where are we going?" He asked, tail lashing.

"You'll see," his mother answered as she wove between trees and ferns until they came upon a clearing. In the center were two cats unrecognizable from this far. Emberburn caught a flash of brown tabby fur and white paws along with pale ginger tabby fur with orange eyes.

"Strike harder, Sandyfrost!" Sneered the brown tabby as his claws struck through the she-cats' shoulder and sprayed blood onto his chest. "You're fighting like a kittypet!"

Emberburn watched in sick horror as Sandyfrost's face was slashed and she let out a shriek of agony, falling onto all four paws. "Help her," he hissed to Nightstar, but she only flicked her ear in response.

As he watched, the brown tabby tom reared on his hind legs and sank his teeth into her scruff. Snapping his head back, he exposed her throat and raised a paw of unsheathed claws, ready to deal the killing blow.

"No!" Emberburn darted from Nightstar's side and pelted toward the tabby tom. Slamming his shoulder into his, he knocked the tom away and arched his back, hissing, and spitting. "Don't kill her! It's against the warrior code!" He growled.

The white-pawed tom stared at him in surprise, his claws still unsheathed and dripping with blood. "Are you feather-brained?" He retorted. "Do you think I'd kill her?"

Behind him, Sandyfrost got to her paws, panting. Emberburn turned and saw her eyes were bright as she looked at her opponent who had nearly slashed out her throat. "That was amazing, Duckfern!" She meowed, flanks heaving. Her shoulder gushed out blood that ran down her leg but she seemed unaware of the injury. "Could you do that again? I think I know what to do."

Emberburn's head spun as fur brushed against his flank and Nightstar nodded to the two warriors. "Excellent job," she meowed approvingly. "How do you feel?"

Duckfern puffed out his chest with delight at her praise. "Better than ever!" He declared.

Sandyfrost dipped her head to Nightstar, a deep look of respect reflecting in her orange eyes. "Bruised," she admitted and Nightstar nodded. "I feel great."

The black she-cat nodded, the white half-circles under her amber eyes seemed to glow. "You two had better wake up and get those injuries treated." She blinked at Duckfern. "We'll see you in a few days, yes?"

Duckfern nodded eagerly. "Of course, Nightstar." He replied and suddenly, he and Sandyfrost disappeared into nothing.

Emberburn turned to his mother, a mixture of disgust and slight

curiosity pricking his paws. "What was that about?" He questioned. Nightstar cocked her head to one side at his question and he added. "The fighting."

"They were training, not fighting." She replied and flicked her tail. "They're training to become better warriors for their Clans." Her amber eyes glowed. "You could train with us as well."

Emberburn's purple eyes widened in surprise and he scrambled backward. "I-I can't!" He blurted. Nightstar's eyes narrowed as he shook his head. "I've just become DawnClan's deputy and I'm still wounded from the battle with NightClan." He watched her tail droop and felt a pang of sadness. "I promise that when I get better, I'll visit."

Nightstar nodded, but he could see the disappointment in her amber eyes. "Alright," she sighed and looked up at him. "Go on. Your Clan needs you." She touched her nose to his cheek and the world started to spin until Emberburn was plunged into darkness.

***

Emberburn trudged into Pebblestar's den, his heart heavy with grief. *How am I going to tell Pebblestar that Shellfur is dead?* "Pebblestar?" He meowed into the darkness, his tail dragging behind him.

"What do you need Emberburn?" Came his leader's voice and Emberburn took a few paces toward his voice.

"I-I need to talk to you." Emberburn's voice was rich with grief and sadness. "It's about Shellfur."

Pebblestar's blue eyes flashed. "How is he?" He asked worriedly, his eyes darted back and forth. "Has he recovered enough to treat the others?"

Emberburn swallowed and lowered his head, shaking it back and forth sadly. "Shellfur died in the battle," he mewed. "Shadowstream killed him in front of Splashnose and Sunnypaw."

Pebblestar's eyes widened with horror and he let out a low,

mournful wail as he sank to the ground, eyes clouded with grief. Emberburn padded toward his leader and pressed supportingly against his side, sharing his grief at the late medicine cat.

"He was a wonderful medicine cat," he murmured in his leader's ear. He could hear his sadness echoing off the stone walls and it seemed to engulf him. *Splashnose and Sunnypaw were too young to witness his death.* "May he rest well in StarClan."

"He died a warrior's death," Pebblestar responded weakly, trembling against Emberburn's sturdy side. "Even if he was a medicine cat when he died, he will always be remembered by his noble sacrifice."

Emberburn nodded, pressing his head against Pebblestar's shoulder comfortingly. They stayed like that for many heartbeats before Pebblestar let out a sigh and got to his feet.

"I'd better announce to the Clan that Shellfur walks with StarClan," he grunted. Emberburn suspected that his wounds were acting up, and he didn't blame the leader. Since the battle was two days ago, and none of the injured cats' were fully healed by Splashnose and Sunnypaw. He turned his blue gaze on Emberburn. "Get some rest, you can sit out the meeting."

Emberburn decided against arguing with his leader and dipped his head, getting to his paws. "Yes, Pebblestar." He mewed respectfully and padded out of the den with Pebblestar a few paces behind.

Patchsnow was waiting for him and she perked up at the sight of the deputy. "Are you alright?" She asked, her voice riddled with worry and concern. Emberburn felt touched. "I saw you disappear with a look of defeat in your eyes. Is everything okay?" As she spoke, Pebblestar emerged from his den.

He met Patchsnow's gaze and shook his head. "Shellfur is dead, Patchsnow." He meowed, his mew rough and smothered in anger. Patchsnow took a step back, eyes wide. "Nothing is okay." Pebblestar bounded passed and perched on the Jagged Stone. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" He yowled.

Emberburn let out a heavy sigh and padded down the rocky slope that led to Pebblestar's den. He was nearly all the way down when Patchsnow bounded up to his side.

"What's the matter?" She asked, her yellow eyes shining with confusion and discomfort. "Are you alright?"

Emberburn nodded, but weariness dragged at his fur and tugged at his paws. "Pebblestar told me to sit this meeting out and rest," he responded. He steered himself toward the medicine cat's den, Patchsnow in tow. "I don't need to be stalked, Patchsnow." He added, looking over at the white-patched warrior.

Patchsnow halted, looking hurt. "A-Alright, Emberburn." She mewed quietly as he padded into the den. "I'll be here when you wake up."

Emberburn was relieved that she didn't persist that he'd be accompanied into the den. Nodding to Splashnose who was tending to the scratches along Mistlesky's face and Sunnypaw treating a bite on Gingerheart's foreleg, he sank into his nest and closed his eyes, giving in to the blackness.

Chapter Twenty

Emberburn blinked open his eyes to find himself in the Place of No Stars, surrounded in fog and dead trees. He rose to his paws and nearly jumped when he made out the shape of his mother approaching. Nightstar looked the same as always: Covered in blood and wounds, with the same shredded ears. He dipped his head to her, respect uncurling deep in his chest. *Despite what she's done,* he thought. *I still respect her not as a leader, but as my mother.*

"Welcome back, my son," Nightstar dipped her head in return and flicked her tail. "You said you wanted to train with us, right?" Emberburn nodded, and his pads pricked with interest and anxiety. "I will introduce you to your mentor."

"Hold on," Emberburn raised a paw, concern flashing beneath his tortoiseshell pelt. Nightstar blinked at him, as though giving him permission to speak. "Will this training help me become a better warrior for my Clan? Because that's all I want out of this."

"Of course," Nightstar nodded her small head, making her tattered ears bob up and down. "Besides, who wouldn't want to be the best, the strongest, and the most powerful cat in their Clan?"

Emberburn had to agree, but he only wanted one thing out of training with his mother: The upper paw when he fought Shadowstream again, to make sure he knew the pain he put Shellfur through when he was slaughtered.

"Now," his mother continued. "Are you ready to meet your mentor?" At Emberburn's nod, she turned to the shadows and called out. "Come on out, Larchstar!"

A sleek black tom with green eyes slid from the murky darkness and Emberburn sturdied himself, digging his claws into the marshy ground as he sized up the tom. They were the same size, but Larchstar had broad shoulders, large paws, and long, curved claws that left gouges in the ground.

Nightstar turned to Emberburn, her amber eyes flaring to life with smoldering fire. "This is Larchstar," she informed him. "He will be your mentor when you train here in the night."

Larchstar flicked his green gaze from Nightstar to Emberburn. "Your mother has told me a lot about you, Emberburn." He mewed, his voice deep like a growl. "I'm looking forward to training you."

"Likewise," Emberburn replied with a glance at Nightstar, who nodded encouragingly. "So," he looked back at his new mentor, suddenly feeling like an apprentice. "When do we start?"

The black tom looked amused as he widened his stance. "Now," he mewed and leapt for Emberburn, who instinctively dodged to the left and avoided Larchstar's snapping jaws.

Emberburn whirled around and struck Larchstar's cheek with a sheathed paw, watching as he staggered and nearly lost his footing before leaping for Emberburn again. This time, he sank his teeth into Emberburn's side and knocked him to the ground, clawing at his shoulder. Emberburn yowled in pain and surprise and flipped over, squishing his mentor and churning his hind paws into his back, digging his claws into his flesh.

Larchstar wrenched his head around and sank his teeth into Emberburn's paw and pain flashed up the young deputy's leg, making him sick. His black-pelted mentor writhed madly on the ground, dislodging the tortoiseshell tom and pinning him to the mushy ground.

Claws raked down the length of his back and Emberburn let out a screech of agony. Thrashing beneath his mentor and desperate to find an escape, he threw all his went to the side and he rolled onto his back, all four paws ready to defend himself. While Larchstar tried to maintain his footing, Emberburn sprang to his paws and slashed his shoulder, making him stumble back unsteadily before falling on his side.

Taking the chance to seize his victory, Emberburn planted a paw on Larchstar's cheek and the other on his side, pressing down hard. "I win," he declared.

A twisted smile worked its way across Larchstar's face and he sneered. "Do you?" He taunted and vanished beneath his paws. Emberburn fell to the ground, startled and confused. Looking around, weight slammed into his back and he rolled across the ground and looked up to see Larchstar towering over him. "I win."

Emberburn fought off the irritation that prickled his paws and he shrugged off Larchstar, getting to his paws. Something refreshing wafted up his nose and he flinched. "Dawn is coming," he mewed to the black cats. "I can't stay here long, I'm deputy still."

"Very well," Larchstar meowed with a dip of his broad black head. "We will meet here to train whenever your wounds have been healed. Until then, play off your injuries as something no other cat should concern themselves with." He instructed, and Emberburn nodded obediently. "We will meet again, Emberburn."

Emberburn blinked as his mentor disappeared, leaving him and Nightstar alone in the Dark Forest. He turned to his mother, a bit confused. "That was it?" He asked incredulously.

Nightstar also mirrored his confusion, but only at his words. "What do you mean?" She mewed. "You trained. You'll train again when your wounds heal enough." She padded around him, circling him with a black cloud of bloody fur. "Is that not enough for you?" Something lit in her amber eyes, and Emberburn blinked.

"It-It's not that," he meowed quickly and sat down, staring at his mix-matched paws. His right paw was ginger, and the other black-and-white.

"Then what is it?" Nightstar demanded impatiently, her white tail tip twitching back and forth with irritation. "We don't all all night. Dawn is coming, like you said."

Emberburn dug his paws into the marshy earth and bit back a retort that would surely get him a clawed muzzle. "Why can't we train longer?" He complained.

Nightstar's amber eyes widened slightly before they narrowed. She opened her mouth, hissing. "My son does not beg," she spat and

swatted his cheek with an unsheathed paw. "The night does not have enough hours to train properly." Her flame-like eyes darkened. "Had I not been killed, I would train you all day." She dug her claws into the ground, her eyes stormy.

Emberburn winced, but nodded stiffly. "I get that," he meowed. In truth, he was glad his mother had died before she could fullfil her desire to destroy OakClan and GlacierClan. Although she had managed to take over OakClan, DawnClan, and NightClan, she'd been killed before she could do the same to GlacierClan. He grunted in irritation and worked his claws into the ground. "It's just- I don't know-" he trailed off, looking at his mother as though she had the words that he couldn't speak. "Why now? Why here? Why not in the forest?"

Nightstar swept her tail across his mouth and narrowed her eyes. "I know you're young and you've just became DawnClan's deputy," she meowed criticizingly. "But if you haven't noticed or wasn't there, you and our siblings led the charge to kill me." Her neck fur started to bristle as her eyes swam with a million different emotions. "I cannot return to the forest whenever I want. When I do go there, it is always at night, as other cats can see me if they are awake." Her tail swished behind her as she went on. "We train cats here so they can be stronger for the good of their Clans."

Emberburn detected the lie that lined her mew and stiffened his shoulders. "Well, I'll leave you to that." He shifted his paws uncomfortably and shot out a question. "Who are you training?"

His mother's eyes flashed with something he couldn't place his paw on but she let out a sigh. "Sandyfrost, Duckfern, Bumblefall, Berrystream, Goldenstar, Wolfstripe, Rowanflower, Wildwing, Bearpaw, Splinterpaw, Stormfern, Cedarpelt, Hickorytree, Rosefur, Pikedive, Nettlepaw, Adderseed, Lizardberry, Ravenflame, Bouldertalon, Snakepaw, Deafears, Driftwind, Sneezestar, Shredsplash, Shelltail, Shadowstream, and Snowmask." She listed the names and it made Emberburn sick.

His heart twisted into a knot at the names of Berrystream, Bumblefall, Goldenstar, Adderseed, Lizardberry, Ravenflame, Bouldertalon, and Snakepaw. *They're betraying their Clan!* He

thought, staring at his mother with wide, unblinking eyes. *And Shadowstream...that's why he outfought me! He killed Shellfur not out of defense, but cold blood!* He backed away from his mother, cold realization washing over his pelt and making him shiver. "I-I can't stay here." He meowed quickly and screwed his eyes shut.

When Emberburn opened his eyes, blood was trickling down his shoulder and back. Everything ached, from the tips of his fur to the ends of his claws. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Emberburn forced himself to his paws and stumbled into the clearing. Being that dawn was nearing, no cat was awake and in the camp. Apart from the guards- Gingerheart and Acornpaw- no other cat was awake. Emberburn felt grateful and incredibly guilty as he felt the scratches on his back and shoulder burn like fire. *I shouldn't have agreed to train with Nightstar and Larchstar,* he thought regretfully as he recalled his mentor's brutality. *But then, they're saying the training will make me a better warrior and deputy for DawnClan.* He shook his head, trying to clear it. *If their relentlessness makes me a better warrior, then I'll train with them.* He decided with a wince as blood flowed down his shoulder.

I should get my injuries treated before any other cat realizes I'm gone. Hesitantly, Emberburn padded toward Splashnose's den on paws that seemed like they were made out of pure stone. His heart felt heavy, and his wounds burned like fire. Despite this, he felt strangely alive. *I could run around the lake if I wanted to.* His muscles didn't ache like he thought and feared they would, but his mind was clear and he had a spring in his step. *Maybe training with Larchstar and Nightstar was a good idea after all.*

***

"Gingerheart, Stoneblaze, and Owlpaw, I want you to take out a hunting party." Embeburn instructed as the warriors clustered around him, eager to be assigned a patrol. "Branchstripe, you take a patrol to the OakClan border. Take Patchsnow, Eggpaw, and Leaffire."

"Right away, Emberburn." Mewed the dark honey-brown tabby tom as he dipped his head and set off to find the other members of his patrol.

Emberburn looked around. "Can any cat lead a patrol to the NightClan border?" He called to Lizardberry as the tom was eating a shrew with Mistlesky, Bumblefall, and Berrystream.

"I can, Emberburn." Mistlesky responded as she rose to her paws and stretched. "Who can I take?" She asked, trotting over to the tortoiseshell deputy with her tail held high above her back.

Emberburn dipped his head respectfully to the older warrior. "Whoever you'd like," he replied. "I'd reccomend taking Rootpaw and Orchidpaw. They need to get some training in them before something happens."

Mistlesky flicked her tail in agreement. "Orchidpaw is starting to fall behind on her training," she mewed in a concerned voice. Emberburn's ears pricked up in alarm, his fur spiking nervously before he forced it flat. "Her hunting is fine, but it's her fighting I'm getting worried about."

Emberburn swallowed a lump that started to grow in his throat and flicked his ears. "I'm sure she's just not used to being an apprentice quite yet," he blinked reassuringly at the dark gray tabby she-cat. "Let Mosspelt know to get her more focused on her hunting. We'll worry about fighting later. Right now, we need more prey than we need more fighters."

Mistlesky dipped her head, her blue eyes soft. "Of course, Emberburn." She rose to her full height once more. "You're a fine deputy, you'll be a great leader when it's your turn."

Emberburn felt his pelt grow hot and he squirmed uncomfortably. "Th-Thanks," he spluttered, unsure if she was joking around or not. "But I'd like to be deputy for a long time before it's my time to lead the Clan." Clearing his throat, he added. "How's Rootpaw doing with her training?"

Mistlesky's blue eyes glowed with admiration as she thought about the yellow apprentice. "Bumblefall says she's doing better and better everyday. I can see it." She flicked her tail. "She'll be a warrior before Orchidpaw!"

Emberburn twitched his tail at her remark and shook his head with a slight laugh. "You'd better go on that patrol before I tell you to do something else," he meowed teasingly as he nudged her shoulder with his nose. "And it won't be pleasant."

The older warrior snorted in amusement before she bounded away to fetch the cats she was taking. "See you later, Emberburn!" She called over her shoulder.

"See you, Mistlesky!" Emberburn meowed after her and he shook his head, purring. *She's so fun to have around,* he thought as he looked aorund. Even though a fresh layer of snow had fallen during the night, Moonkit, Sablekit, Nightkit, and Flowerkit were playing outside the nursery while their mothers watched.

Moonkit was Lizardberry and Snowshine's kit, and Sablekit, Nightkit, and Flowerkit was Branchstripe and Coppersight's kits. Nightkit's name had brought unease and distrust in the camp, especially when it came to Echospeck, Halfsnow, and Poppybee. They'd known Nightstar when she was alive, and the kit's name had brought an immense amount of pain and memories upon the elders.

Emberburn wasn't so sure Nightkit would be trusted when she became a warrior, or even when she became an apprentice. *Who would mentor a cat with the name of someone who caused so much pain?* The dark brown tabby she-kit leapt on top of Sablekit, who flipped her off and chased her into a snowdrift. Emberburn watched as Flowerkit and Moonkit watched them, their pelts brushing as they talked quietly. *What are they talking about?* He wondered, but pushed it away as he got to his paws. *They're just kits, I shouldn't concern myself with kit-gossip.*

"Emberburn?" Emberburn turned around and saw Mistflight standing awkwardly waiting for him.

"Sorry," Emberburn mewed and blinked at the young she-cat. "What can I do for you, Mistflight?"

The pale-gray she-cat looked uncomfortable as she shifted on her paws. Emberburn's ears twitched impatiently. "Well," she flicked her tail to the camp entrance. "There's someone here to see you."

Emberburn looked over at the bramble tunnel and froze. His heart started to pound as he saw Lilyrose standing in the entrance. She looked impatient as she tapped her paw on the ground, looking annoyed. "Right." He gathered himself and nodded to Mistflight. "Thank you. I'll talk with her." Heading over to Lilyrose, he tried to look as respectful as possible. "Lilyrose," he mewed politely with a swift dip of his head, holding her blue gaze. "What can I help you with on this fine leafbare day?"

Lilyrose took a deep breath and looked him in the eye, making his heart skip a beat. "We need to talk." *I didn't do it,* he thought instantly.

"Of course," he mewed instead and straightened himself, keeping himself looking calm and collected. "Let's go for a walk in the forest. But we can't be long." Turning his head to the nearest warrior- Fennelfur- he added. "When Gingerheart's patrol gets back, send out another hunting patrol."

Fennelfur nodded. "Yes, Emberburn." She replied and dipped her head.

Turning back to Lilyrose, Emberburn nodded. "Lead the way." He ordered and followed the pretty medicine cat as she headed into the trees. Once they were outside the camp and away from nosy ears, he hissed. "What were you thinking? Pulling that kind of stunt? You'll give us both shredded ears."

Lilyrose lashed her plumy tail once and it was enough to make Emberburn hold his tongue as she opened her mouth. "I had to talk with you," she mewed, her voice tight with worry and something Emberburn couldn't place his paw on.

"What about?" He pressed. "And couldn't it have waited until we met?"

Lilyrose shook her head. "I didn't know when we would meet," she replied earnestly. "Besides, I think you should listen to me." She took a deep breath and stopped, looking up at Emberburn with fear in her eyes. "I-I had a vision."

Emberburn's shoulders tensed and he nodded. "About what?" Then, he asked a better question. "Why are you telling me and not Goldenstar?"

The white-and-gray she-cat took a deep breath and shrugged her shoulders, looking defeated. "I-I don't know, Emberburn." She sighed heavily and looked at the ground.

"What was the vision about?" Emberburn asked, trying his best not to let his impatience and curiosity show too much. *I still want to be friends with her,* he thought.

"That's what I was going to tell you," she mewed slowly and looked up into his eyes. For a heartbeat, he saw every emotion swimming in her gaze. Confusion, fear, concern, want, longing, and nervousness glowed in her light blue eyes. Emberburn's heart skipped a beat and his breathing quickened. "I dreamed that I was in the forest, and I was hunting. When I came to the border with DawnClan, I saw you." Her eyes glistened with a millon thoughts, and Emberburn longed to sit with her and let her vent out every little thing that was bothering her. "Your littermates were there- Hollyfire and Mosspelt- and they were just sitting by the stream."

"What were they doing other than that?" Emberburn interjected, wanting to know every detail. *She dreams about me.* The thought slapped him but he kept himself in check.

"They were just staring into the water," Lilyrose went on, her voice trembling slightly. "When I went to see what they were looking at, I saw the water." She shuddered, and Emberburn shifted closer to her, their pelts nearly brushing. "The water was completely black. There were no fish, no stones, not even a pebble. But, there were amber eyes staring back at them. You came down to the water's edge and all three of you leaped into the water." She looked up at Emberburn, her eyes huge like twin moons. "You splashed me, and when I looked at the water, it was clear with stones and pebbles."

Emberburn looked at her in confused silence. "What's that supposed to mean?" He meowed, his voice colored with awe. *I didn't know medicine cats got* those *kinds of visions.* "That my littermates and I have to jump into some water?"

Lilyrose let out an irritated and exasperated hiss and shook her heads. "I think it means that you three can get rid of Nightstar once and for all." Her voice was coaxing, as though she was trying to get a kit to eat some nasty herbs. "You can do that, right?"

Emberburn stared at her as though he'd never seen her before. "W-What?" He mewed, outraged as his voice hardened to anger. He narrowed his eyes at her, suddenly wary. "I can't kill my mother!"

"That's not what I meant," Lilyrose mewed and reached out a paw. "I meant that-"

"No!" Emberburn swatted her away with a powerful strike, throwing her to the ground. "I'm not killing my mother! I'm not killing any cat!" He shouted.

Lilyrose flinched and scrambled to her paws, looking shocked and angry. "You have to!" She spat back at him. "Nightstar is nothing but a bad memory for the cats who she tormented! Killing her will free us all!"

"You don't understand, Lilyrose!" Emberburn dug his claws into the ground, fury rising inside of him as he glared at the medicine cat. "I'm an honorable deputy and warrior of DawnClan! I would never break the warrior code by killing a cat! Even if that cat is my mother!"

The gray-and-white she-cat stared at him, defiance gleaming in her light blue eyes. "But you're already breaking your precious warrior code, aren't you?" She scolded, and Emberburn took a step back, tail bristling and lashing from side to side. "You're meeting with that-that...that half-blooded tyrant!"

Emberburn launched himself at her, knocking her off her paws and slamming her into the snow, pinning her on her back as he dug his claws into her chest. Lilyrose gasped in pain, but the fire in her eyes burned as bright as stars. "You know nothing, Lilyrose." He snarled threateningly, baring his teeth in her face. She cringed away from him, suddenly looking small. "You're just a stupid, good-for-nothing, medicine cat." He sank his teeth deep into her shoulder and threw her away, watching as she scrambled in the snow and stood a few

fox-lengths away. "Get out of my territory!" He screeched.

Lilyrose looked horrified, but she lashed her tail as blood flowed down her shoulder. "You're not Emberburn," she spat. "You're Nightstar. You've become her." With that, she turned and limped away.

***

"Where have you been?" Pebblestar demanded as Emberburn dragged himself back into the camp, feeling like boulders were dragging him down. "Fennelfur told me you went into the forest with the OakClan medicine cat. Is that true?"

Emberburn nodded, his claws still unsheathed. "It's true." He meowed, his voice hollow and ringing emotionlessly in his ears.

Pebblestar looked baffled. "Then where is she?" He looked over Emberburn's shoulder. "I wanted Splashnose to talk to her."

"She left."

"That quickly?" Pebblestar sounded shocked, but he shook his head. "Nevermind. Where is Mistlesky and her patrol? They should've been back by now."

Emberburn shrugged his shoulders, straightening. "Fennelfur!" He called, and saw the sandy she-cat bustle from the warrior's den with Berrystream and Acornpaw on her tail. When they approached, Emberburn flicked his ears. "Where is Mistlesky and her patrol?"

"I'm not sure," Mistlesky meowed honestly. "Maybe they decided to hunt on their way back?" It sounded more like a question, and Emberburn felt impatience flare in his chest.

"Find them." He snapped at her, startling Pebblestar. "I want Bouldertalon, Mistflight, Fennelfur, and Russetpelt to go search at the NightClan border. Whiskerflame, you take Deafears, Stemfang, and Ravenflame. Go to the OakClan border and circle to the NightClan border." No cat moved, and Emberburn stamped his paw with a hiss. "Go!"

The cats scattered and Emberburn spun on his heels, calling out names. "Acornpaw, Owlpaw, Mosspelt, Hollyfire, and Bumblefall! Follow me!" Without waiting for any cat to object or say anything, he pushed through the bramble barrier and exploded into the forest, his cats hard on his heels.

"What are we looking for?" Hollyfire called from behind. Her eyes were wide with shock and confusion as she ran up besde her brother. "Emberburn, talk to me!"

Emberburn didn't respond as they weaved in and out of the trees, dodging the snow mounds that blocked their path. He leaped over a fallen tree, and ran toward the NightClan border. He smelled blood long before he heard the screeching and yowling of battling cats. Blood stained the snow around them, leaving a trail that led over the border and into NightClan's swamp.

"What in StarClan's name is going on?" Owlpaw mewed, sounding scared as he ran beside Acornpaw. "Why are they fighting so deep into NightClan's territory?"

"I'm not sure," Mosspelt meowed over her shoulder at the apprentice. Worry clouded her voice and Emberburn's heart beat faster and faster, making the blood roar like a horde of bees in his ears. "Whatever it is, we need to get there quickly."

"We might not have to," Hollyfire said, coming to an abrupt halt that made Owlpaw launch himself nose-over-paws into the snow. Emberburn stopped by his sister, watching as her ears twitched back and forth. "The screeching: It's stopped."

She was right. Emberburn could no longer hear the sound of painful screeching or howls of pure rage. "What happened?" He wondered, taking a few paces into the snow-covered swampland.

Just then, a shape flew from the nearest tree and hurled itself at Emberburn. The weight of the mysterious cat carried himself off his paws and sent him skidding in the snow. As he scrambled to his feet, he shook the snow from his pelt and stared in absolute horror at the cat who had knocked him clear.

It was Sneezestar. The leader of NightClan. Surrounding them was what looked like the entire Clan. Maplewhisker, the deputy, stood by her leader, her teeth bared as blood dripped from her whiskers.

Shredsplash was glowering them, her tattered ears flattened against her head as she hissed in rage. Beside her was her mate Shadowstream, his eyes burning with hostility and revenge.

The whole of NightClan surrounded the small DawnClan patrol. And they had no way out and no way of escaping. Sneezestar stepped forward, his eyes burning with anger and hatred.

"You and your Clanmates are tresspassing, Emberburn." He snarled, his green eyes glittering. "You already knew that, didn't you?"

Emberburn gulped and waved his tail low to the ground in a sweeping motion. *Tail-to-tail.* The order was clear and the group of DawnClan cats closed ranks. "We mean no harm to your Clan, Sneezestar." He meowed, trying not to let his fear show. He was pretty sure they could smell it. "We're just passing through."

"I don't think so," snarled Shadowstream as he took a step forward, his eyes burning with the thirst for blood. *He killed Shellfur.* Emberburn braced himself and bushed out his tail. *He will pay.* "You aren't going anywhere."

Sneezestar raised his head and barked out an order. "NightClan! Attack!" At once, the NightClan warriors closed in on the DawnClan patrol. And Emberburn's fear turned to rage.

Shadowstream leapt for Emberburn, followed by Maplewhisker and Shredsplash. They brought the DawnClan deputy to the ground in a matter of heartbeats, clawing and snapping at him. Emberburn let out an outraged snarl and lashed out blindly with all four paws. His claws scored through flesh and fur, but the NightClan warriors pushed back with a force that made him uneasy. *They want me dead, just as I want Shadowstream dead.*

Maplewhisker shot a paw toward his neck, but he wrenched his head around and sank his teeth into her forepaw. She screeched in

pain as he twisted his head around and she fell on her shoulder. Taking the chance, Emberburn kicked Shredsplash and Shadowstream away and scrambled to his feet, breathing hard as blood soaked his fur. He faced Shredsplash and Shadowstream, realizing that even though he'd knocked down Maplewhisker, the NightClan deputy would still get up.

A chestnut-colored flash of fur took him by surprise as Acornpaw leaped onto Shredsplash's back and clawed her shoulders. The warrior let out a cry of pain and tried to buck the apprentice off, but Acornpaw held on with a strength that awed Emberburn. Acornpaw slammed her paws down on Shredsplash's head and the NightClan warrior reared on her hind legs and landed on her back, dislodging the apprentice.

Claws ripped at Emberburn's back, dragging him backward as Maplewhisker tried to pull him to the ground. A flash of gray-and-white splotched fur flew over his head as Mosspelt tackled Maplewhisker off Emberburn's back. The NightClan she-cat grappled madly with Mosspelt as Emberburn spun on his heels and leaped onto her back. Realization flashed through her yellow eyes and she backed away from Mosspelt and Emberburn.

"This isn't over," Maplewhisker hissed, her eyes burning bright with fury and begrudging defeat. "I'll line my nest with both your pelts. Mark my words."

"Spitting threats while you run off, Maplewhisker?" Mosspelt growled, her tail bushing out to twice its' size. "Seems pretty cowardly."

Maplewhisker snarled in return but disappeared into the dark trees before she could respond. There was a flash of blue tabby fur as Shredsplash hauled herself after her deputy. Emberburn turned around to see Acornpaw facing off against Shadowstream, the tom's eyes smoldering with rage as blood ran down the side of his face from a torn ear.

"Is that all you've got, medicine cat killer?" Acornpaw challenged the older warrior as she shot forward, scratching Shadowstream's cheek before leaping out of his reach. "You're weaker than I

thought."

Shadowstream hissed in anger and pain as blood started to well up from his cheek wound. "An apprentice with more courage than the entire Clan combined," he growled. "Never seen that before. You're harder to kill than that pathetic excuse of a former warrior. What was his name again? I seem to have forgotten."

Acornpaw bristled with outrage as her tail bushed out like a squirrel's. "His name was Shellfur, you fox-hearted fish-eater." She snarled and lunged for Shadowstream's throat, teeth bared into a ferocious snarl. "I'll kill you!"

"Acornpaw!" Mosspelt cried as Heronstripe flew through the air and intercepted the apprentice, throwing her to the ground with a *thud*. "No!"

Emberburn charged at Heronstripe, but a flash of ginger tabby fur stopped him as Firestripe stood between him and Acornpaw, who was hissing under Heronstripe. "Get out of my way, fox-breath." He growled menacingly. "That apprentice doesn't need to spill her own blood for a worthless conflict."

"Emberburn." Mosspelt touched her nose to his ear, her voice soft. Emberburn looked at his sister and followed her gaze to a broken body lying in the snow. His heart broke. Owlpaw was laying on his side, his flanks barely moving as blood ran down his side. It stained the ground around him, and Emberburn stared in silent horror as Sneezestar looked over at the warrior, blood dripping from his chin and whiskers.

"Owlpaw..." Emberburn stared at the small cat as his attackers strode toward Heronstripe and Firestripe. "No."

"Let the apprentice go, Heronstripe." Sneezestar commanded with a sweep of his thin tail. His green gaze rested on Emberburn, his pupils slitted. "Let this be a lesson to you, Emberburn. Tresspass on my territory again, and we will not be so merciful."

Heronstripe released Acornpaw and stood by her leader's side, eyes glittering. "Yeah," she sneered. "You drove off two of our warriors,

but we have more than you."

Acornpaw hurried to Mosspelt's side and arched her back at the NightClan warriors. "You call that mercy?" She spat, pointing a claw at the pitful shape of her brother. "You could've killed him! That's not mercy!"

"We could have," Shadowstream pointed out with a hint of malice in his cold tone. "But we didn't. That's mercy, apprentice."

Acornpaw looked like she was about to argue when Owlpaw raised a paw feebly and let out a high-pitched whimper. She ran by the NightClan cats and crouched beside her brother, her tail swishing in the snow behind her. "We have to get him back to camp." She looked over her shoulder at Emberburn. "What are you doing? Come on!"

Emberburn took a pace toward the two apprentices, but halted at Sneezestar's side. "I know what you're doing, Sneezestar." He hissed in the NightClan leader's ear. "Acting all tough for Nightstar, aren't you? You're pathetic. You don't deserve to be a Clan leader."

Sneezestar stiffened. "You don't know anything, Emberburn." He growled back, but his shoulders were rigid and his fur bristled uneasily. "Curious cats get their noses bitten. Now get out of my territory."

***

"Cobwebs!" Splashnose snapped to Sunnypaw as Emberburn dragged Owlpaw's limp body into the medicine cat's den. Acornpaw was in tow while Mosspelt talked to Pebblestar about what happened. "Hurry! Emberburn, get him into a nest."

Emberburn did what he was told and practically threw Owlpaw into the nearest moss nest. He made sure his worst wounds were exposed, but he was comfortable.

"Get a juniper berry," Splashnose told her apprentice as she rushed to Owlpaw's side and began wrapping a wound on his neck and

shoulder. "I need marigold and horsetail!"

"Coming, Splashnose!" Sunnypaw mewed as she hobbled forward with a thick wad of cobwebs wrapped around her forepaw. When Splashnose took the white webs, she turned around and came back with a berry that Splashnose immediately fed to Owlpaw.

"Will he be okay, Splashnose?" Emberburn asked urgently, looking from the wounded apprentice to the medicine cat. He could see her fear reflected in amber eyes and she looked troubled. *She's so young. She probably doesn't know if he will.*

"We'll do our best," Splashnose promised but lowered her voice. "I can't say for sure, but he may not make it through the night." Worry colored her tone and it sent shivers down Emberburn's back.

"Make sure he does, please." Emberburn meowed quietly. He twitched his tail. "Acornpaw, Eggpaw, and Sunnypaw need him." Looking over at the medicine cat apprentice, he saw how scared and distressed she looked and felt a pang of sympathy for the young cat.

Splashnose nodded grimly. Her eyes flicked to the den entrance and she took a breath, raising her voice. "Pebblestar wants you," she meowed in a stern voice. "Don't get your pelt ripped off."

Emberburn followed her gaze and saw the blue-eyed leader standing in the entrance. Rising to his paws, Emberburn dragged himself out of the den and followed Pebblestar into the clearing. *Let's hear it.* He thought.

"What were you thinking?" Pebblestar hissed in his ear as they crossed the camp toward the leader's den. "Taking two apprentices along. Are you mad?"

No, but you are. Emberburn bit back the words that would surely lend him an unwelcome swat. "I didn't know we would get attacked." He said instead, looking at his leader before looking away. "If I had known, I would've taken more cats than I did."

"Why's that?" Pebblestar asked, suddenly concerned as he looked

into Emberburn's heather-colored eyes. "How many warriors did you encounter?"

"How about all of them?" Emberburn snorted and scuffed the ground. "Sneezestar about killed Owlpaw before he told us to get out." He shook his head angrily. "Those fox-hearts nearly killed two apprentices and disgraced the death of an honorable medicine cat who was defending his apprentices."

"They are going outside the code," Pebblestar remarked and looked across the clearing before looking at Emberburn. "How did Owlpaw and Acornpaw fight?"

Emberburn thought back to the battle where he was trying not to be turned into crow-food. *I didn't see them fight, but I saw how bravely they faced the NightClan cats.* He considered. "They fought like warriors." He replied, looking over at his leader. "Why do you ask?"

Pebblestar looked at him thoughtfully for a few heartbeats before answering. "I was considering making them warriors when every patrol got back." He meowed seriously.

"What about Owlpaw?" Emberburn pointed out, not wanting to sound curt. "He's in no condition to attend a naming ceremony. He may not survive the night, that's what Splashnose said." Nervously, he looked over at the medicine cat's den where Sunnypaw was emerging with moss dangling from her jaws.

"He'll survive the night," Pebblestar mewed firmly. Emberburn looked at him, ears pricked. *He sounds so confident. But what if he's wrong? What if Owlpaw dies?* He shook his head, trying to clear it. "He will. StarClan will wait their turn to take another of our cats." Pebblestar looked at Emberburn, eyes twinkling. "I will hold the ceremony at once. Owlpaw will get his name when he's better."

Emberburn dipped his head respectfully. "Yes, Pebblestar." He meowed. He was trying to mask his eagerness to have more warriors in the camp. *More paws to help around when an apprentice can't.*

Pebblestar leaped on top of the Jagged Stone and called the

summons. While the Clan gathered, Emberburn saw Gingerheart and Branchstripe slipping out of the warrior's den and he ran to meet them.

"What's going on?" Asked Branchstripe as Emberburn reached them. "What is Pebblestar calling a meeting for?"

"He's making Acornpaw and Eggpaw warriors." Emberburn explained. "He's waiting for Owlpaw to get better to give him his name." He added, seeing the confused look on Gingerheart's face.

"What will he name them?" Gingerheart wondered as they made their way to the growing crowd of cats at the bottom of the Jagged Stone. They found a place to sit and settled down, chattering amongst themselves. "Maybe Acornpaw will be Acornblaze."

"What about Eggpaw?" Branchstripe flicked his tail to the pale tom who was sitting by his sister. "He's going to get a weird name like Eggflight or Eggheart."

Emberburn nudged Branchstripe. "Shhh, Pebblestar is about to speak." He nodded to where the leader was proudly perched on the Jagged Stone.

"Cats of DawnClan, I bring good news." Pebblestar began with a sweep of his tail. "Today we will be welcoming two new warriors into the Clan. Acornpaw, Eggpaw, please come forward." He held a paw up. "True, Owlpaw is fighting for his life, but when he gets better, he will get his name as well."

There was a mutter of doubt that came from Emberburn's right. "You mean *if* he gets better." Growled Adderseed as he sat with Patchsnow, Stoneblaze, Ravenflame, and Orchidpaw. "He's half-dead as it is."

Pebblestar ignored his comment and raised his head to the sky. "I, Pebblestar, leader of DawnClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have endured so much and have trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and I condemn them as warriors in turn." He looked at Acornpaw and Eggpaw. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend

your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Acornpaw was the first to respond as she took a step forward, her head held high. "I do." She meowed strongly.

Eggpaw puffed out his chest, his eyes shining. "I do." He echoed.

Pebblestar nodded in approval. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior names. Acornpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Acornheart. StarClan honors your bravery and will to defend your Clanmates and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan." He leaped down from the Jagged Stone and rested his chin on her head. Acornheart bowed her head and licked his shoulder in response.

"Acornheart! Acornheart!" Cheered the Clan.

"Eggpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Eggsplash. StarClan honors your quick mind and kind nature and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan." Pebblestar repeated what he did with Acornheart, and Eggsplash licked his shoulder.

"Eggsplash! Eggsplash!"

Pebblestar waved his tail for silence and went on. When Acornheart and Eggsplash went back to their seats, he cleared his throat and continued. "There are four kits among us who have reached their third moon and are ready to become apprentices." He turned his head to the nursery. "Moonkit, Sablekit, Nightkit, Flowerkit, come forward."

Moonkit was the first to get her apprentice name, becoming Moonpaw. Mistflight became her mentor, and Emberburn looked over at Snowshine, who was watching her kit with pride and excitement.

Next was Sablekit. After being named Sablepaw, Pebblestar called out a name.

"Emberburn, you are a skilled and loyal warrior and you trained Stemfang to be the honorable and noble warrior he is now." Pebblestar meowed with a flick of his tail. "I know that you will

pass on all you know onto Sablepaw."

Emberburn nodded and rose to his paws. Picking his way through the crowd to get to his new apprentice, he touched noses with the little cat, who seemed ready to burst with excitement. Once they sat back down, Pebblestar continued.

Nightkit became Nightpaw, and the air thickened with tension as Pebblestar seemed to draw out the silence. Finally, he picked Adderseed to be Nightpaw's mentor. Emberburn noticed that the young warrior didn't seem too keen on training the new apprentice, but he hoped he'd go easy on Nightpaw.

"Flowerkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Flowerpaw. Stemfang, you are a honorable and noble warrior and you trained under Emberburn. He has made you a fantastic warrior, and I know that you will teach your apprentice the same skills your mentor taught you."

"Moonpaw! Sablepaw! Nightpaw! Flowerpaw!" Snowshine started the chant, followed by Lizardberry and eventually the whole Clan. Emberburn heard that Nightpaw's name was being called quietly, but he made sure to glare at every cat who looked skeptical about the brown tabby apprentice.

"Meeting dismissed." Pebblestar concluded and leaped down from the Jagged Stone. Emberburn watched him as he padded toward Fallingash and the two touched noses and purred.

"Emberburn?" Sablepaw mewed, rising to her paws and looked eagerly up at her new mentor. "What will we do first? Hunting? Fighting? Touring? Can we go into NightClan's territory? Will we see a patrol?"

Emberburn smiled at her excitement and rubbed her head with a paw before chuckling. "I have to assign a few of the night's patrols, so we won't do anything exciting until tomorrow. But, you can check on the elders and see if they need anything." He suggested with a twitch of his ears.

"Okay!" Sablepaw mewed enthusiastically as she turned around and

bounded toward the elder's den as Tornface and Poppybee slipped inside.

Emberburn turned in a circle before sitting down. He took a couple deep breaths before he raised his voice. "Stoneblaze, take Snakepaw, Snowpaw, and Hollyfire to the OakClan border and mark the trees." He called to the blue-gray warrior who was coming back through the dirtplace tunnel, snow clinging to his muscled frame. "Leaffire, you can take Lizardberry, Snowshine, Gingerheart, and Russetpelt to the NightClan border. Make sure you don't get too close, but be sure to mark the border without being seen by Sneezestar's cats."

Once the patrols were gone, Emberburn got to his feet and stretched, shaking the snowflakes that were starting to cling to his fur. The darkening camp was quiet and cold as a snow was falling in thick white flakes that chilled Emberburn to the bone. He shivered, turning his head to the nursery before looking at the elder's den. *Would the kits and elders get sick this leafbare?* He wondered, worried.

"Are you trying to catch a cold?" Splashnose's voice startled Emberburn as the young she-cat padded up and stood beside him. Her eyes were haunted and shadowed, as though the snow was making a blanket over her eyes. "Go into the warrior's den before your paws and ears turn to ice."

Emberburn heaved a heavy sighed and twitched his ears. "I'm just thining, that's all." He murmured and looked to the blackening sky and shuddered.

Splashnose touched her nose to his ear and looked off into the trees. Her breath puffed in front of her muzzle as she pressed her side against his. "I know," she meowed softly. "Leafbare is here already and the kits and elders are vulnerable. Shellfur should be here too." She added quietly as she closed her eyes.

"He died bravely," Emberburn mewed in her ear as he sat back down. Splashnose didn't reply, so he went on. "He's watching you and Sunnypaw from StarClan, Splashnose. I know that he's very proud of you and how you've been training Sunnypaw."

"I...I know," Splashnose meowed and blinked open her amber eyes and turned her gaze on him. She pressed her cheek against his shoulder as tears welled in her eyes. "I miss him, Emberburn. I miss him so much." A sob built in her mew and Emberburn pressed his muzzle against hers comfortingly.

"I do too," he mewed, his voice shaky. "But he's not here anymore, you and Sunnypaw are." Emberburn straightened and Splashnose looked up at him with tears running down her cheeks. He nudged her and got to his paws. "You can only do your best while he's in StarClan. Besides, you'll see him whenever you see the Moonpool."

Splashnose sniffed as she slowly calmed down. She rose to her paws and nodded unceartainly. "Of course," she mewed and touched noses with Emberburn. "Thank you."

"Of course." Emberburn dipped his head and padded toward the warrior's den, feeling exhaustion claw at his pelt. Ducking inside the den, he breathed in the familiar scents of his Clanmates and his mind filled with the next morning's patrols. Curling in his warm nest near the back of the den, he closed his eyes and welcomed the sleep that followed.

Chapter Twenty-One

Emberburn took a quiet step toward the mouse as it searched the snow-covered ground for a seed to eat. He'd weaved through several large piles of snow and came upon the scrawny rodent. He breathed in the tantalizing scent of the small brown mouse and tensed his muscles for the spring that would earn him a nice catch. Readying his haunches, Emberburn leaped forward and the mouse squeaked as his shadow fell over it. With a quick bite to the mouse's neck, it fell limp.

"That's something for the kits," he meowed to himself as he looked proudly at his catch. The snow had driven almost all the prey in the forest to their cozy dens and many cats went hungry after a long, cold day. The mouse was the second one he'd caught, he'd buried the first under an oak tree not far from where he caught the second.

Standing up, Emberburn grabbed the prey between his jaws and headed for the tree he'd buried the other piece of prey he'd caught and quickly buried it. After scraping some snow on the fresh hole to keep out the scent of fresh-kill, Emberburn set off once more. He shivered as he watched a large clump of snow fell from a tree branch ahead of him and snowflakes kicked up as it fell.

He liked hunting alone, it was the only chance he had to think on his own and not busy himself with patrols. Before he left the camp at sunhigh, he told Sablepaw to go with Splashnose and Sunnypaw to gather what herbs they could before cats got injured or sick.

"When I come back, I'll check with Splashnose to see how you did." Emberburn had told his apprentice before he left. "I'll let you come to the Gathering tonight. If you did well, I'll even teach you a battle move or two if you're not tired."

Sablepaw had been eager to learn a battle move, but she seemed more excited about the Gathering. "Yes, Emberburn!" She'd replied enthusiastically before she spun around and charged to Splashnose's den.

After prowling around for a while, he came upon an old crow that was pecking at the ground, its beady yellow eyes glassy. *It's sick.* He thought with a pang of sympathy for the black-feathered bird. The crow pointed its sharp black beak to the ground and snatched up a pink worm before gulping it down hungrily. Dread filled him as he dropped into a hunting crouch and crept forward. He didn't want to kill the clearly sick bird, but his Clanmates would die if he didn't. As he got closer to the crow, he took a deep breath and launched himself forward. The bird squawked as it saw him and flapped its large black wings. Emberburn swatted one of the wings and pounced on it, biting its throat. The crow fell limp beneath his paws and he silently prayed to StarClan that it wouldn't be sick if it had an afterlife.

Raising his head, he carried the crow to the tree where he'd buried the mice and dug them up, the snow stinging his pads. Making sure the prey wouldn't fall out of his mouth, he started toward back to the camp. It was hard to walk with the crow in his mouth, but he held the mice by their tails and the bird by its left wing.

As he reached the camp entrance, he nodded respectfully to the two guards- Berrystream and Bouldertalon- who gawked at his successful catches. Shouldering into the camp, Emberburn strode proudly into the center of the clearing and dropped the prey on the small fresh-kill pile.

A *mrrow* came from the elder's den and he turned to see Tornface walking towards him. Her left eye was gone and her body was scarred from the fox who killed Goosewing. Her right eye was bright as she rested her gaze on the crow. "Nice catch, Emberburn." She complimented as she leaned down to scoop up the bird. "I'll let Poppybee, Echospeck, and Halfsnow know that you're letting us have full bellies."

Emberburn awkwardly dipped his head to tattered elder. "Th-thanks, Rose- er, Tornface." He mewed, still unsure of the name she'd chosen for herself when Goosewing had been killed. "I was going to take the mice to Fallingash and her kits." The cream tabby she-cat had given birth to Pebblestar's kits only a few sunrises ago in the middle of the night. She had two kits: Sandkit and Hazekit, a tom and a she-cat. Emberburn knew that the queen would need the

two mice not just for herself, but for her kits as well.

"I'll let you do that," Tornface meowed with a purr of approval. "See you later, Emberburn." She turned and trotted away to the elder's den with her tail held high above her back.

Emberburn scooped up the mice by their tails and set off to the nursery. He could smell the warm, milky scent of the kits before he even reached the den and it felt welcoming. Padding inside, he headed for Fallingash's nest, he prodded the queen awake. "I brought you some prey," he mewed as he put the mice at her paws. "You must be hungry."

Fallingash yawned and blinked open her bright blue eyes. "Thank you, Emberburn." She meowed, her voice blurry with sleep. She reached out with her paws and pulled the two mice towards her chest and started to nibble at the first one.

Deciding to leave the she-cat to eat, Emberburn turned around and slid out of the nursery. He sauntered into the clearing and yawned, wanting to catch a nap before he took Sablepaw into the forest to battle train. The camp entrance came alive and he turned his head to see Splashnose, Sunnypaw, and Sablepaw trotting happily into the camp with their mouths full of herbs Emberburn didn't know. Sablepaw's eyes met Emberburn's and she blinked excitedly at him, but she followed the medicine cats into their den before bounding out a heartbeat later.

"Hi, Emberburn!" She meowed cheerfully, her eyes gleaming with pride. "How was your hunt?"

Emberburn purred in greeting. "Well, hello to you too, Sablepaw." He touched his nose to her forehead affectionately as he watched her look up at him admiringly. "My hunt was good, I caught a crow and two mice."

Sablepaw's orange eyes widened in surprise and she bounced on her paws. "That's amazing!" She mewed. "Where is it? Can I see?"

"Tornface took it to the other elders to eat." He meowed apologetically. "Sorry, but you'll have to wait to see a crow when

you catch one." Sablepaw's bubbly mood didn't waver as she beamed up at him, a broad smile across her face. "I'm going to check with Splashnose to see how you did. You can get something to eat while I'm gone. If she says you did well, you can come to the Gathering."

Sablepaw nodded vigorously. "Can you teach me how to catch birds?" She asked, sounding slightly hesitant.

"Don't you want to know how to fight?" Embeburn prompted, a little confused. Most apprentices wanted to learn how to fight instead of learning how to hunt.

Sablepaw shrugged her shoulders. "Not really," she meowed with a glance at the fresh-kill pile. "The Clan needs more prey right now." Looking back up at her mentor, she added. "Right?"

Emberburn felt a burst of pride at his apprentice's words and nodded. "Of course. Well, when I come back and you eat, I'll take you into the forest and teach you about hunting birds." He dipped his head and shook out his fur. Turning away from his apprentice, he headed toward Splashnose's den. He pricked his ears as he heard the medicine cat talking to her apprentice.

"Have you seen where that horsetail went?" Came Splashnose's distracted voice as he neared the cave.

"It's by the dock," answered Sunnypaw.

Emberburn padded through the curtain of vines and lichen and mewed a greeting as he saw Sunnypaw crossing the den. "Hi, Sunnypaw." He purred warmly.

The yellow tabby apprentice looked over at him and blinked in greeting. "Splashnose, where's that burdock root that Sablepaw collected?" She asked over her shoulder as she pawed through the holes in the side of the stone wall where the herbs were neatly sorted.

Splashnose's tail flicked as she pushed some dark green leaves into a large crevice. "It's above the chervil and next to the poppy seeds."

She turned around to show her apprentice when she saw Emberburn. "Ah, hi, Emberburn. I didn't hear you come in. What do you need?"

"Just checking in," Emberburn assured the medicine cat. She looked busy and her amber eyes focused. "How did Sablepaw do on your herb collecting adventure?" He asked with a flick of his ears.

Sunnypaw turned around and beamed at Emberburn. "She did great!" She burst out joyously. "She helped me get so much borage and marigold, we'll have enough to last almost the entire leafbare!"

Splashnose gave her apprentice an amused yet stern look and shook her head playfully. "Sunnypaw's right," she agreed. "Your apprentice seemed to enjoy gathering herbs. She helped with the marigold, borage, and some burnet. We found so many herbs, we had to leave some behind to get tomorrow." She dipped her head. "Thanks for letting her come with us. Most apprentices don't like spending time with the medicine cats." Her tone was light, but Emberburn nodded.

"Of course. If you ever need help, I'll send Sablepaw your way." He blinked warmly at them both. "You'll see her more often if she really likes helping you both out." With a respectful dip of his head to the two she-cats, he turned around and padded out of the den. Once he was outside, he spotted Sablepaw sharing a relatively medium-sized squirrel with Rootpaw. They chatted away and Emberburn felt a flicker of appreciation that Pebblestar gave Sablepaw to him to train.

"Hey, there Mr. Deputy." Purred the warm voice of Hollyfire as she trotted up with Mosspelt at her side. Emberburn looked at his sisters and nodded curtly. They hadn't talked for what felt like a lifetime, and Emberburn had gotten too caught up in his deputy position to make time for them. It was a shame, he wanted to spend more time with his family.

"Hi." Emberburn responded and swept his tail against the ground. "How are you two doing?" He asked, looking between his littermates.

"I'm doing fine," Mosspelt mewed with a look over her shoulder at

Gingerheart, who was talking to Snowpaw and Snakepaw. "Gingerheart was planning on going hunting with me, Snowpaw, and Snakepaw later. Want to come? Hollyfire's coming with Russetpelt, Deafears, and Whiskerflame."

Emberburn felt touched that his sister wanted to go hunting with their entire family but he shook his head sadly. "I promised Sablepaw that I'd teach her how to catch birds." He dipped his head. "Maybe next time."

Something flashed in Hollyfire's eyes as she eyed him. "Alright," she considered tartly. "Come on, Mosspelt. Let's go see if Snakepaw and Snowpaw want to go to the OakClan border to hunt." They padded away and Emberburn felt a pang of frustration as he shook his head, wishing he'd said yes instead.

"Sablepaw!" He called to his apprentice, who finished the squirrel and was conversing with Rootpaw and Orchidpaw. The oak-brown apprentice looked up and rose to her paws. Emberburn crossed the camp and nodded to Rootpaw and Orchidpaw. "Come on, we're going into the forest." He looked at Sablepaw. "If you want to catch a bird, we have to leave now."

Rootpaw's light purple eyes widened and she shared an astonished look with Orchidpaw. "You never said you were going to go hunting!" Rootpaw mewed, sounding awed.

Sablepaw looked at her paws, embarrassed. "I-I was going to tell you," she meowed, shifting her weight from paw to paw. "But I wasn't sure if Emberburn was going to let you come." She glanced up at her mentor, her orange eyes sheepish.

Emberburn let out a small amused purr. "It's alright," he mewed reassuringly, but looked at the two sisters. Rootpaw was staring at Sablepaw, but Orchidpaw just looked uncomfortable. "I'm afraid I can't let you come. Check in with your mentors and perhaps next time I'll let you join us."

Rootpaw's tail drooped and she let out a disappointed sigh. "Yes, Emberburn." She meowed and her and Orchidpaw padded away, her tail dragging behind her.

Emberburn nudged his apprentice's shoulder with a paw. "Come on, let's go." Turning swiftly away from her, he headed for the bramble tunnel with Sablepaw on his heels.

***

"Alright," Emberburn mewed once him and Sablepaw were deep enough in the forest to find a few birds. He turned to her, and saw her eyes gleaming with determination. "When stalking a bird, you want to keep your paws light and stay away from anything that make a sound or trip you. If the bird sees you and tries to fly away, leap as high as you can and swat it down. As soon as it's on the ground, pin it and kill it quickly. Be careful of its beak because it will try to defend itself."

Sablepaw nodded in understanding. "I will." She meowed confidently, her voice strong.

Emberburn blinked. "Good." He beckoned with his tail to the far trees. "Try going over there and find a bird. I'll see what I can catch over here." Sablepaw set off, and Emberburn turned and tasted the air. He caught the scent of a vole a tail-length away from a fallen log and dropped into a hunting crouch. Stealthily stalking toward the scent, his mouth started to water and he peeked around a gorse bush and saw the small brown mouse-like creature sniffing the cold ground for food. Gathering his haunches under him, Emberburn leaped forward and slammed one paw on the vole's tail and the other on its back. The vole let out a squeak of terror that was cut short as it fell limp. After burying the prey, Emberburn stood up and looked around, ears twitching.

There was a yowl from where he'd sent Sablepaw and alarm shot through him. Had she been ambushed by a NightClan patrol? The vole forgotten, Emberburn ran through the trees and followed Sablepaw's clear scent trail toward a small meadow that was covered with snow. Ahead of him he could see the oak-brown fur of his apprentice standing over something. He let out a loud snarl and exploded from the bushes, leaping over Sablepaw and looking around for anything that attacked her.

Sablepaw let out a shriek of fear and Emberburn whipped around,

concerned. She scrambled away from him, tripping over her tail and landing on her paws. Her eyes searched him for a heartbeat before she let out a shaky sigh. "E-Emberburn! You scared me." She meowed after a few moments.

"Are you okay?" Emberburn demanded, looking her over and sniffing her pelt. She smelled like a thrush, and she had blood on her muzzle. "I heard a yowl. Is everything okay?"

"I-I'm fine," she spluttered and got to her paws, trembling. She stared at him in shock and slight fear. "I-I just caught a thrush. That's all." Sablepaw motioned to the feathered body which lay under Emberburn's belly.

The deputy's fur grew hot with embarrassment and he cleared his throat awkwardly. "Right, sorry." He swallowed, trying his best to smooth his fur. "I heard your yowl and I thought you'd been attacked." He touched his nose to her cheek. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Sablepaw's shocked expression turned to one of amusement. "I'm sure," she soothed and pressed her cheek against his muzzle comfortingly. "I promise, I'm okay."

Emberburn drank in her familiar scent and let out a relieved sigh. "That's good. Next time, don't yowl. You'll scare off any prey and you'll scare me to death." He joked, but he was glad she was alright. Looking at the thrush, he added. "That's a good catch. I think you should eat it when we get back to the camp."

Sablepaw pricked her ears in surprise. "Are you sure?" She asked, glancing around. "But the warrior code says that the elders, queens, and kits should be fed first."

"I know." The tortoiseshell tom rested his tail on her back, pride spreading through him. "But they've already been fed. Besides, prey tastes way better when you catch it yourself." He bumped his side against hers playfully. "Come on, I'm sure you want to show Rootpaw and Orchidpaw the impressive catch you got."

Sablepaw's orange eyes shone with gratitude. "Thank you,

Emberburn." She meowed with a polite dip of her tabby head. "You're an amazing mentor." She grabbed her thrush and twitched her ears. "Did you catch anything?"

Emberburn nodded, remembering his vole. "I did. Let's go get it and then we'll head back."

By the time they'd gone back to the camp, Emberburn had caught a mouse and Sablepaw had narrowly managed to snag another vole. He was proud of his apprentice, but Sablepaw seemed to be prouder than he could ever be. They shouldered their way into the camp as night fell. They'd be getting ready to go to the Gathering soon, and Emberburn wanted to let Sablepaw rest before going. After dropping their prey off at the fresh-kill pile, he turned to his apprentice.

"Get some rest before we leave." He instructed and Sablepaw nodded, looking tired. "I don't recommend sleeping, just lay somewhere and I'll have Rosepaw and Shinepaw get you." Emberburn touched his nose to her head. "You did very well today. Tomorrow, you can have the day off. The other apprentices will do the duties. You just rest."

Sablepaw nodded, looking grateful as she padded away to join Tumblepaw and Larchpaw, who were sharing tongues outside the apprentice's den.

Emberburn yawned and stretched. He turned his paws in the direction of Pebblestar, who was laughing as Sandkit and Hazekit crawled blindly around at his paws. Fallingash watched beside her mate, her eyes glowing with happiness and pride.

Pebblestar looked up as he approached and cleared his throat, dipping his head to his deputy. "Hello, Emberburn." He meowed. "What's today's report?"

Emberburn dipped his head to his leader and his mate before speaking. "Nothing out of the ordinary, Pebblestar. The patrols reported that NightClan's border has been marked strongly, but no sign of their warriors was there."

"And OakClan?" Pebblestar prompted.

"Nothing," the deputy answered simply. "Their borders were marked, and Wolfstripe told me that they saw a few of their warriors by the border." Pebblestar stiffened, but Emberburn went on. "They were kind and polite, and they went their separate ways shortly after."

Pebblestar's yellow tabby fur smoothed once more and he nodded approvingly. "That's good. We've been at peace with OakClan for a while now, and I want to keep it." He fixed Emberburn with a proud stare. "Tornface told me about your hunting earlier. I'm glad to know that even though you're training an apprentice and being deputy, you've made time for hunting."

Emberburn dipped his head, feeling warmed by his leader's praise. "Thank you, Pebblestar." He purred. "I'm only doing my duty to serve my Clan as best I can."

***

The full moon glowed over Emberburn's head as he padded beside Pebblestar with Splashnose and Sunnypaw on the leader's other side. He pricked his ears as he heard chattering in front of him and suspected that one or two of the Clans were already there. He tasted the air, confirming his suspicions. *GlacierClan and OakClan are there. NightClan is late.*

"Let's go!" Pebblestar meowed loudly and raised his tail as he headed for the treeline that ringed the Gathering Island. Hurrying to his side, Emberburn matched his pace with Pebblestar's.

"I wonder what NightClan will report." He mewed in his leader's ear, keeping his voice low and neutral.

Pebblestar flicked his ear. "I'm not sure. Whatever they report, we need to be prepared." Without looking at Emberburn, the large DawnClan leader bounded ahead to join the two leaders on the High Tree.

Emberburn looked behind him as Rootpaw and Orchidpaw bounded

forward, their eyes shining. He blocked them with a paw, his voice stern. "Wait. Before you go charging into the clearing, make sure you don't say too much to the other Clans." He warned. "Don't say too little, though. Keep the conversation about training and something other than our weaknesses." Sablepaw padded up, her orange eyes bright. "You too." He added. "Did you hear that?"

Sablepaw nodded seriously. "Yes, Emberburn." She meowed, puffing out her chest as she, Orchidpaw, and Rootpaw bounded into the clearing.

Emberburn scanned the cats as his Clanmates filed into the large space. He recognized almost all of the cats, minus a few apprentices and elders. He brightened as he saw Lilyrose with her apprentice, but when she met his gaze, his blood ran cold.

Lilyrose's eyes flashed with distrust, pain, and regret as she turned away to answer a question from Driftpaw, NightClan's medicine cat apprentice.

Sighing, the tom padded toward Frogstep, Tawnyheart, and, Talonclaw of GlacierClan. Talonclaw was an ex-OakClan warrior, and he shuddered as he recalled the silver-and-white tabby warrior killing Streampool.

"Emberburn!" The familiar call of Owlflight of OakClan stopped him in his tracks and he looked over, seeing the friendly tabby tom waving a paw. Beside him was Stormfern of GlacierClan, the new deputy under Sparrowstar. "Come over here!"

Purring, Emberburn bounded toward his friends and butted heads with them. "How is everything in OakClan and GlacierClan?" He asked curiously.

Stormfern answered first with a purr. "Petalfire, Fawnstripe, and Daisystep gave birth." She mewed fondly with a look at Sparrowstar, who was talking quietly with Pebblestar and Goldenstar. "Nettlefoot and Maplewood became warriors." She added.

"That's great," Owlflight mewed with a nod. "Elmpaw, Elkpaw, and

Moosepaw became apprentices. Pearpool, Rowanflower, and Hailfrost also gave birth. Whorlwing, Riverwater, Topazshine, Yonderwatcher, Rainclaw, Ripplepool, and Smogshade became warriors." He puffed out his chest proudly.

"That's awesome," Emberburn meowed, his shoulders relaxing. The other two deputies looked expectantly at him and he let pride color his mew. "Moonpaw, Sablepaw, Nightpaw, and Flowerpaw became apprentices. Sablepaw is my apprentice." He puffed out his chest, just as Owlflight did. "Hollyfire and Mistlesky's kits were made warriors and Fallingash gave birth to two kits."

Owlflight and Stormfern nodded, but Emberburn could tell they were uneasy. They were interrupted by a yowl from one of GlacierClan's warriors. Emberburn stiffened as the scent of frogs and fish bathed his tongue.

"NightClan's here," Stormfern growled, her shoulder fur bristling. "And they don't look friendly."

"When do they ever look friendly?" Owlflight commented and Emberburn shot him an amused look.

"You're late, Sneezestar." Sparrowstar meowed icily as the NightClan leader clawed up the High Tree and clambered on the same branch as Goldenstar, making it dip beneath his weight. "You know the rules: You show up late, you get to report first."

Sneezestar shot the brown tabby leader a toxic glare before facing the crowd. Emberburn scanned the NightClan cats, who stuck to themselves. There seemed to be more than a normal Gathering patrol, and Emberburn unsheathed his claws. *They're up to something.* "NightClan has nothing to report other than a warning to DawnClan and GlacierClan." He snarled. "If you challenge our borders and cross them one more time, we'll show you no mercy when we fight back."

Sparrowstar's neck fur rose and her yellow eyes narrowed. "Are you *threatening* my Clan, Sneezestar?" She growled, her voice taut with anger. "If you are, which your warriors should hope that you aren't, then GlacierClan will rip your fur off."

The NightClan leader hissed and lashed his tail. Raising his voice, he said. "A few days ago, a patrol of DawnClan warriors crossed the border on purpose." Emberburn saw Owlflight and Stormfern look at him in surprise. "Led by their fox-hearted deputy, Emberburn nearly killed one of my warriors!"

Emberburn bristled, springing to his paws to snarl at the tabby leader. "Liar!" He spat. "You're warriors attacked us first when we were merely looking for another patrol!"

Pebblestar shot Emberburn a warning glance before he cleared his throat, clearly forcing himself to be calm in the face of the hostile and upset NightClan leader. "Sneezestar, I know that Emberburn's tresspassing on your territory upset you, but you nearly killed *two* apprentices."

"I doesn't surprise me that you have a soft spot for him, Pebblestar." Growled Sparrowstar as she turned her narrowed yellow gaze on the blue-eyed tabby. "You were always trying to talk to NightClan, even when you were a warrior."

Goldenstar looked confused. "Why would you say that, Sparrowstar?" He meowed, looking bewildered.

"Because," snarled Sneezestar as he glared at Pebblestar. Something glittered in the younger leader's green eyes. "We used to be mates."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Emberburn was as shocked as the rest of the Clans as he stared at Pebblestar as his leader lowered his head in shame, his eyes darkening. The world around him blurred as he stared at the leader he served under as Clan deputy. *Pebblestar and Sneezestar?* His head spun as his leader raised his head again, his blue eyes smoldering.

"You're lying!" Yowled Gingerheart as he bared his teeth, fur bristling from where he sat with Branchstripe and Snakepaw. "Pebblestar would never love Sneezestar!"

Pebblestar glared at Sneezestar and Sparrowstar before letting out a caterwaul. The yellow tabby tom looked embarrassed, but he more so looked furious. "That was a long time ago, Sneezestar." He squared his shoulders and leaped down from the High Tree. "DawnClan! We're leaving." The Clan looked hesitant to join their leader, but Emberburn bid farewell to Owlflight and Stormfer. He bounded down the stone he'd been sitting on with the two deputies and joined Pebblestar at his side.

"Run away, Pebblestar!" Jeered Duckfern as he got to his snow-white paws. His eyes were taunting as he bared his teeth as the leader passed by with his Clan on his heels. "Hide your shame!"

Emberburn flicked his ears back and he drew his lips back into a snarl, prepared to defend his leader when a soft sigh came from Pebblestar and he looked over at him. His leader's eyes were shadowed and haunted, as though the memories were too painful to remember. *I'll talk to him when we get back to the camp.* He decided, already dreading going back.

Fur brushed against his side as Sablepaw looked up at him with wide orange eyes. "Is it true?" She whispered, careful not to make herself heard by Pebblestar. "Were Sneezestar and Pebblestar mates?"

Emberburn flicked his tail and eyed her sternly. "We do not gossip

about our leader," he told her firmly. "He was granted his lives by StarClan. If we doubt our leader, we doubt StarClan and the warrior code." After he was done speaking, he couldn't help but glance uneasily at his leader, who was silent.

As they trekked through the forest, Sablepaw padded by her mentor's side. They crossed the border and the she-cat pricked her ears, her nose twitching as she looked back and forth. Her orange eyes glittered in concern and confusion, and Emberburn shot her a curious look.

"What's the matter?" He prompted.

"Don't you smell that?" Sablepaw asked, looking up at her mentor. Her gaze was thoughtful, but also scared. Emberburn tasted the air, and caught the whiff of something dark. "I don't recognize it at all."

Fresh horror shot through Emberburn and he jogged to Pebblestar's side, murmuring in his ear. "Smell the air." He meowed anxiously. When his leader did, he added. "Sablepaw doesn't know the scent. But it reminds me of-" A shriek from Patchsnow interrupted him and he whipped around.

"Fox!" She cried and a huge russet burst from the trees. Emberburn screeched a warning but every other cat was fully aware of the fox. Patchsnow darted to the side, narrowly missing the fox's snapping jaws. Emberburn noticed, with a pang that the fox had scratches and bites along its side and legs and blood ran freely down the side of its face.

"Protect the apprentices!" Yowled Stoneblaze as he reared on his hind legs and swatted at the fox, scoring his claws across its nose before he was batted away with a massive black paw.

Emberburn shot to his Clanmates' defense and leaped onto the fox, clawing at its side. Teeth hooked him in return and the fox tore him off its flank, tossing him like a pile of leaves. His back connected harshly with another cat and a piercing cry of pain echoed in his ears.

"Emberburn!" Acornheart was writhing beneath him, her voice

awkward and pained. Emberburn couldn't reply as teeth sank into his shoulder and he was lifted from the young warrior. Pain lanced through him and he let out a wail, feeling blood start to run down his shoulder and leg.

"Let him go!" There was a furious shriek and out of the corner of his eye he saw Sablepaw flinging herself bravely at the fox. She clawed ferociously at its shoulder, but she looked so tiny compared to the black-pawed animal.

The fox cried out in pain and released Emberburn, allowing the deputy to scramble away, panting in agony. Sablepaw was clinging onto the fox's shoulder, fighting hard as she bit and scratched.

"Sablepaw!" Flowerpaw stared at her sister in dismay from where she crouched with Nightpaw and Gingerheart. "Sablepaw, get off of it!"

"You'll get yourself killed!" Branchstripe yowled as he watched his daughter fight like a lion. His eyes were wide with fear and horror, something Emberburn never thought he'd see in the prickly warrior. "Get down!"

Emberburn forced himself to his paws and winced as more blood trickled from the bite on his shoulder. "Sablepaw!" He felt helpless as he watched his apprentice had her hind claws tangled in the russet fur of the fox. Energy surged through him, making him forget about the pain in his shoulder. He sprang forward, slashing at its chest before another cat was beside him, then another, and another.

Acornheart and Owlheart were to his right while Eggsplash, Adderseed, and Patchsnow were to his left. Emberburn ducked as the fox lunged for his throat and Acornheart lashed its cheek.

"Patchsnow, look out!" Owlheart's shout of alarm was cut short as the fox whirled around and sank its teeth deep into Patchsnow's throat. Emberburn stared in sick horror and shock as the fox spun on its heels and raced off, Patchsnow screeching as it ran into the forest.

"Patchsnow!" Branchstripe let out a strangled cry and launched

himself after the fox, but Gingerheart and Adderseed held him back. "Let me go!" He snarled, his eyes wild, frantic, and panicked. "I have to get my sister!"

Emberburn felt frozen to the spot as he stared at where Patchsnow and the fox had disappeared. His head spun and he felt sick. He gagged, turned around, and threw up the prey he'd eaten. He trembled, his stomach felt turned over as he stared aimlessly at the ground. A sturdy support pressed against his side and he breathed in the scent of Hollyfire. Blood and pain pooled down his shoulder, but the pain felt dull, almost muffled.

He heard voices, but the words were slurred and around him, the world spun around and around and around. His paws felt like stone as he was forced into a walking motion and he staggered, being caught by what smelled like Hollyfire, but her fur was just a cloud of tortioseshell. His belly felt like a rock as he stumbled blindly, unsure of if he was following his Clanmates or shadows. Emberburn's vision doubled and he replayed Patchsnow being grabbed by the fox and he saw the terror in her eyes as she was taken away. Taken from the Clan. Taken from Branchstripe and Snowshine. Taken from *him*.

Emberburn felt a void grow in his chest until it consumed his entire body. He tripped over his paws and fell onto the cold, hard ground. Snow kicked up around him but he hardly felt the pain that flared up in his face. Some cat, he didn't know who, nudged him to his paws and murmured in his ear.

"Pebblestar's sent Mistlesky, Leaffire, and Snowpaw to find her." He recognized the voice, but he could only tell it was a she-cat. His ears rang from the sound of her terrified screaming and it echoed until he thought his head would burst. "We'll find her, Emberburn." The she-cat touched her nose to his cheek and wandered off into the green blur that Emberburn could smell the the DawnClan camp. His heart ached to find Patchsnow and shred the fox that took her from him. But his paws wouldn't move and his legs felt like ice.

Suddenly, fury flared up inside his chest and his vision cleared. He stormed toward Pebblestar's den and shouldered his way forcefully into the cave. Two cats inside jumped, startled, and the scents that

filled his nose were Pebblestar and Splashnose.

"Get out." He snarled to Splashnose and the medicine cat skiddered out of the den quickly. He turned his purple gaze to Pebblestar, who was looking everywhere but at him. "You let her be attacked. You let her be taken away!"

Pebblestar flinched as Emberburn got closer and closer until their muzzles were nearly touching. "I didn't know what to do." The words were so soft, Emberburn could barely hear them over the pounding of his heart as it thumped in his chest.

"You could've helped us!" He shouted, and Pebblestar's ears flattened to his head. "You could've fought with us! Not stood there like a frightened kit being scolded!"

"I *was* frightened, Emberburn!" Pebblestar growled, turning his burning blue eyes on his deputy. The tom was shaking, but not from rage, but from grief and fear. "I was frightened of watching my Clan being slaughtered! I was frightened of never seeing some of my friends ever again! I was frightened that-" He broke off, choking on his words as he looked from Emberburn to the stone floor.

"What?" Emberburn demanded, hot rage flooding through him afresh. "What? Are you too scared to say it? Say it!" He rose his voice to a caterwaul, his tail lashing back and forth madly.

"I was frightened that I wouldn't see you again!" Pebblestar shoved Emberburn away from him, tears filling his eyes as he looked at him. His eyes darted away as he took deep, gulping breaths. "There. I said it. Now...leave me alone." Pebblestar seemed resigned as he turned away, suddenly looking many, many seasons older and much skinnier than he was.

Emberburn felt nothing but shock and anger as he turned away and stalked out of the den. He lifted his head from staring at the ground to see Mistlesky dragging a familiar dark brown-and-white splotched shape into the camp. His heart sank as he saw blood from Patchsnow's limp body and he crumbled to the ground, his throat tightening and closing.

"The fox killed her," panted Leaffire, her eyes wide with shock and grief. "It saw us and left her behind." The brown-and-white tabby she-cat began to shake, and Snowpaw padded to her side and pressed against her, his yellow eyes glazed with unspoken sights. "It-It was ea-eating her." She shuddered, and stared at the ground.

"Emberburn," Mistlesky padded towards the deputy and touched her nose to his head. "I'm so sorry." She murmured, and her eyes shone with sympathy and sorrow.

Emberburn stared at Patchsnow's broken body wordlessly. Her once bright eyes that always shone were now glazed and sightless. He shuddered. *Does she blame me for her death?* He wondered as he continued to stare. Her splotched fur was matted, torn, and bloody and it made Emberburn's heart crack further.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Pebblestar's voice rang throughout the hollow and Emberburn turned and glared up at the leader, their earlier fight still fresh in his mind.

He padded beside the stone and took his place, his eyes fixed on the ground and staring into nothing. *I'm so, so, so sorry, Patchsnow.* He thought glumly as Pebblestar talked about what happened at the Gathering and explaining what happened to Patchsnow. *It should've been me. I should've saved you.*

"Is it true?" Echospeck got to her paws and looked up at Pebblestar as she strode into the center of the circle of cats. Her blue eyes gave away what she already knew. "Were you mates with Sneezestar?"

Pebblestar hung his head and let out a deep sigh. "It's true." He meowed guiltily.

"Traitor!" Stoneblaze shouted from where he stood with Tornface, who looked equally as horrified.

"Sparrowstar was right," hissed Stemfang as he looked up at Pebblestar. "Perhaps she should be leader of DawnClan!"

Emberburn shot to his paws and glared at his former apprentice. "Do *not* say that!" He snarled, and Stemfang jumped, startled. He held Stemfang's shocked gaze and lashed his tail. "I did not teach you to say such things about your leader." He narrowed his eyes as Stemfang's fur bristled. "Especially in the presence of the entire Clan."

"But it's true," snorted Ravenflame as he rose to his paws from his place next to Snowhsine and Coppersight. He strode into the center of the clearing and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Echospeck. He turned his blue eyes to Pebblestar. "How can we trust a leader who divides his loyalty with another Clan? With the *leader* of another Clan?"

Muttering broke out amongst the Clan and Emberburn felt all the energy drain from his limbs. His legs buckled as he turned his paws to the Jagged Stone and he leaped up next to his leader.

"They're right and you know that." Pebblestar murmured as Emberburn steadied himself beside him. His blue eyes were dark with guilt and he looked up at Emberburn. "They don't trust me anymore, and I don't blame them. They need a leader that they can trust." He locked gazes with Emberburn and understanding flashed in the deputy's chest.

"I-I can't lead," he choked, despair and shock filling him. "No cat wants the kit of Nightstar to be a leader!"

Pebblestar flicked his ears and Emberburn fell quiet. "I trust that you will lead them well, Emberburn." He put a paw to Emberburn's cheek and his voice and eyes softened. "If I didn't, why would I make you my deputy? I trust you, Emberburn." After a moment, he turned back to the Clan. "I, Pebblestar, leader of DawnClan hereby renounce my role of being DawnClan's leader. I will be a normal warrior by the name of Pebblewhisker and hold no power in the Clan." He dipped his head, and Emberburn gulped.

The clearing was quiet until Hollyfire raised her voice. "Emberstar! Emberstar! Emberstar!" She chanted, being joined in by Mosspelt.

The cheering strengthened, but Emberburn could see the doubt and

suspicion in some of the cats' eyes as they looked at him. Emberburn bowed his head, but doubt made his fur prickle uncomfortingly.

***

Splashnose stood behind Emberburn as he saw the Moonpool glistening a few pawsteps away. She nudged him forward, and he stumbled, nearly falling into the sacred pool. "Don't be afraid, Emberburn." She advised with a flick of her fluffy tail. "StarClan wants to see you."

That's what I'm afraid of. He thought as he swallowed his fear and crouched beside the water, the reflection turning his fur silver. Closing his eyes, he lapped gingerly at the surface and shivered at the sheer coldness that touched his tongue. At once he was plunged into darkness. When he opened his eyes, he was surrounded by starry spirits that smelled like ferns and leaves. Some cats had red outlines, and the stars were upside down.

"Welcome to StarClan's Hunting Grounds, Emberburn." Meowed a red-brown tabby she-cat as she took a pace forward. Emberburn shifted his paws. "My name is Oakstar. I am the founder of OakClan." Oakstar's yellow eyes rested on him like a flame, despite being shorter than him. He crouched down and closed his eyes. "With this life, I give you compassion. While it always burns in your heart, it will burn brighter than ever when the time comes." The small she-cat touched her nose to Emberburn's head.

A hot wave crashed over Emberburn's body and he let out a screech of pain, crumbling to the ground. His claws pierce through the soft ground and he gritted his teeth, narrowing his eyes up at the small, fluffy leader. She gazed at him sympathetically as she turned around and padded into the crowd. As Emberburn stood, a large fluffy white tom took Oakstar's place.

"Like Oakstar, I am also one of the Clan's founders." The white tom meowed, his voice authorative and strong. "However, I am not OakClan's founder. I am GlacierClan's founder and my name is Glacierstar, formally Glacier Peak." He leaned over and touched Emberburn's forehead with his nose. "With this life, I give you duty.

As leader, you suffer great stress. With duty, you'll never forget how to lead your Clan."

Emberburn dug his claws deeper into the earth and screwed his eyes shut, lip curling into a painful snarl. His muscles tensed and his tail quivered as a cold current nearly swept him off his paws. When he had the strength to open his eyes, Glacierstar was gone, to be replaced by a pale-ginger face wth yellow eyes.

"Greetings, Emberburn." Rumbled the thick-furred plump she-cat. Her voice startled him, as it carried a strange accent that sounded strange. "My name is Dawnstar, founder of DawnClan. I am glad that my Clan will be led by you." She dipped her head for a brief moment before clearing her throat. "With this life, I give you the ability to trust the words of your warriors. When times are tough and prey is slow, your warriors will be the glue to hold the Clan together. Trust them when you doubt yourself." She touched her pale pink nose to his head and a cold feeling spread in his chest, clawing at him.

Emberburn gasped, his eyes widening as he trembled, his legs threatening to give out and make him fall to the sweet-smelling meadow ground. Dawnstar raised her head and padded away to join Oakstar and Glacierstar. A night-black tom stood where Dawnstar had and greeted Emerburn with a nod.

"My name is Nightstar, NightClan's founder." Mewed the slender tom as he gazed at Emberburn. "Like you're mother, I was half-Clan. We share the same name in death, but vastly different names in life. With this life, I give you hope. When you lose it, those around you will bring it back to you, and it will burn brighter than ever."

Emberburn felt his fur heat up and he squirmed uncomfortably as the black tom dipped his head and padded away. When the discomfort faded, he lifted his head and met the friendly face of Whiteblaze. His heart ached as he saw the old she-cat restored to her youthful strength and he longed to tell her all about Coppersight and Lilyrose.

Whiteblaze shook her head and spoke. "Do not grieve for me, Emberburn." She advised with a twitch of her ear. "With this life, I

give you motivation. If you feel like all is lost, this life will push you on to keep leading your Clan." She touched her nose to his head and Emberburn buckled under another wave of agony that seared through his body, leaving him trembling and gasping for breath.

The familiar and heart-wrenching face of Patchsnow bounded up in Whiteblaze's place and she happily purred a greeting. Emberburn felt his heart tear as he noticed her fur was no longer stained with blood and ripped by the fox. "Hello, Emberburn." She mewed cheerily. "With this life, I give you care. Care for your Clanmates as you do for Lilyrose." She paused, and added softer. "And for me." She touched her nose to his head and Emberburn breathed in her sweet scent, quivering.

Emberburn purred loudly as warmth flooded through him, easing the pain from the previous lives he'd gotten. When he closed his eyes, he saw Lilyrose beaming at him with a twinkle in her eyes. He wanted to believe that he could be with her, but the borders that kept them separated them stretched beyond the Clan territories. Blinking open his eyes, he watched as Patchsnow padded away and Goosewing bundled forward.

"Hello again, Emberburn." The speckled gray tom mewed, his voice strong and confident. "With this life, I give you honor. Your Clan will look up to you, and you must honor the faith they have in you. No matter what." Goosewing leaned forward and grazed his nose against Emberburn's head.

Images flashed through his mind: The fox that killed Patchsnow, Tornface when she was still Rosefern, Goosewing's limp body when the fox had killed him. Claws gripped him and he staggered as cold clawed up his limbs and encased him. He let out a cry, and Goosewing's yellow eyes flickered with sympathy.

Goosewing dipped his head to Emberburn and padded away, to be replaced by Streampool. The dark blue-tabby warrior looked fit and bright, like he had been before Talonclaw killed him.

"I was hoping to see you again, Emberburn." He purred and Emberburn blinked warmly at him. "With this life, I give you forgiveness. Many in your Clan have made mistakes; you yourself

are among them. However, when their mistakes come to light, push those mistakes away and find it in your heart to forgive them." He touched his nose to Emberburn's, and the tom gasped in surprise.

A violent spasm engulfed him and he started to shake. His claws dug into the ground as he struggled to stand still. When he regained balance, a sinister yet familiar face was looking at him. Her amber eyes glowing, the red outline surrounding her looked like the blood that oozed from several gaping wounds.

"Nightstar." He breathed, still trembling from the life Streampool had given him. "Why are you here?"

"To grant you your ninth life, my son." She mewed shortly and flicked her tattered ears. "With this final life, I give you the strength to do what you need to do in order to survive. Whether it be saving a life or taking it, you must survive. No matter the price." She leaned forward and touched her nose to Emberburn's.

At once, images flashed in his mind: His father when they met in StarClan, becoming an apprentice, killing Nightstar, becoming a warrior, becoming a mentor, watching Stemfang become a warrior, becoming deputy, falling in love with Lilyrose and Patchsnow, watching helplessly as Patchsnow was killed, and when Pebblewhisker gave up leadership and made him leader. He looked at his mother, blinking gratefully but unable to speak.

Nightstar took a pace back and raised her voice. "I hail you by your new name, Emberstar. Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you the guardianship of DawnClan. Defend it well; care for the young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

The cats who gave him his lives raised their voices after Nightstar finished speaking. "Emberstar! Emberstar! Emberstar!"

His mother locked gazes with him before she raised her head to the open starry sky. "Emberstar!" She yowled.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was lightly snowing when Emberstar and Splashnose returned to the DawnClan camp as the sun started peaking over the horizon and striking through the trees. It felt weird being leader, Emberstar noticed. He was used to being a plain warrior or deputy. When he imagined being a warrior as a kit, he dreamt about being leader or deputy. Now, with the moons gone by, he wasn't sure if he could be a good leader to DawnClan.

The two cats guarding the camp- Lizardberry and Snowshine- dipped their heads as the leader and medicine cat padded by and Emberstar felt strange. It was off-putting that he now had command over every single cat in the Clan. He'd been in charge of the warriors and apprentices when he was deputy, but now, he was the leader. There was no cat who wouldn't follow his orders.

As he made his way up the Jagged Stone, he felt the eyes of Splashnose following him with every step he made. Once he reached the top, he could see the sun as it barely peaked above the treetops and it warmed his face, washing away the anxiety from when he went into the cave of the Moonpool. The gray stone beneath his pads felt familiar and the cold bit at his paws.

"Call the Clan together," Splashnose meowed up at him from where she sat off to the left in front of her den. She looked so small from where he stood on the Jagged Stone, her amber eyes shining.

Emberstar cleared his throat and raised his voice to a summoning yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" The words felt strange on his tongue, as though he were eating a new piece of fresh-kill.

Rootpaw and Orchidpaw fumbled out of the apprentice's den, which was the closest den to the camp entrance. Rootpaw looked up at him with excitement burning in her purple eyes, while Orchidpaw looked tired and worn.

As his Clan came out of their dens, he waited patiently as he watched the sun starting to rise. A gentle chilly breeze ruffled his fur and he breathed in the refreshing cold air of leafbare while the snow that was falling eased.

"Cats of DawnClan," he meowed, gazing across the Clan as every cat looked up at him. "The ceremony at the Moonpool was completed and I have received my nine lives and name from StarClan."

"Welcome home, Emberstar!" Hollyfire called, her eyes shining with pride as Mosspelt strode to her side.

"Emberstar!" The Clan took up the chant and Emberstar felt taken aback. Moons ago when Lichenstar was leader, the entire Clan was wary of him and his sisters. Now, they welcomed him as their new leader. Warmth filled his chest and he grinned at his Clan.

"Who will you choose as deputy?" Fennelfur called up at him.

"Yes, who?" Echoed Branchstripe as he and Adderseed shared a curious look.

Emberstar was deep in thought for a moment before it popped in his mind. There was one other cat who knew the struggle of having a past relationship with Nightstar. One other cat other than his sisters who knew of being with Nightstar. "I say these words before the spirits of my warrior ancestors, so they may hear and approve my choice." He meowed, looking at the cat who he'd make his deputy. "Leaffire will be the new deputy of DawnClan!"

Nightstar's former apprentice looked stunned, but she held her head high with pride. "I'd be honored to be your deputy, Emberstar." She meowed, her voice strong and confident; as she should be.

"Leaffire! Leaffire! Leaffire!" Cheered the Clan as they accepted their new deputy.

"Before I dismiss this meeting," Emberstar continued once the chanting had quieted down. "I'd like to name a new warrior." He looked at Rootpaw, who was confused. "Rootpaw, please come forward." The she-cat looked at him in surprise as she stumbled

forward. "I, Emberstar, leader of DawnClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and I condemn her a warrior in turn." He locked gazes with her. "Rootpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Rootpaw held her head high, her confusion and surprise melting away like snow on a sunny day. "I do, Emberstar." She meowed boldly.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Rootpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Rootspeckle. StarClan honors your courage and care for your Clanmates and we welcome you as a full member of DawnClan." He leaped down from the Jagged Stone, landing hard on the ground but he held himself up, despite the pain that lanced up his legs. Striding towards the new warrior, he rested his muzzle on her head and she licked his shoulder in response. As he pulled away, the Clan broke into cheers.

"Rootspeckle! Rootspeckle! Rootspeckle!" Emberstar saw Rootspeckle and Orchidpaw's mother, Fennelfur yowling while watching her daughter with pride and love burning in her eyes.

"Meeting dismissed!" Emberstar meowed with a whisk of his tail and the Clan dispersed around him. He was greeted by Orchidpaw, who looked sullen and upset.

"I know why you didn't make me a warrior," she mewed quietly, her ears flattened against her head.

Emberstar's ears pricked and he tipped his head to one side. "What do you mean?" He asked, gesturing with a paw to where they could sit by the medicine cat's den. Once they were settled, words started tumbling out of Orchidpaw's mouth.

"I'm not cut out to be a warrior." She meowed, her voice bitter. "I don't do well in battle training and I don't like learning how to hunt and fight." Orchidpaw's claws dug into the ground and Emberstar flicked his ear in surprise. "Mosspelt is trying her best with me, I know, but I don't want to be a warrior." She turned her different

colored gaze on her leader, and Emberstar could see the distress that glittered there. "Emberstar, please make me Splashnose's apprentice." She begged. "I want to be a medicine cat, not another plain warrior."

Emberstar blinked at the apprentice, taken aback. "Splashnose already has Sunnypaw as her apprentice," he reminded her gently. "Maybe when Sunnypaw gets her full name, I'll make you their apprentice."

Orchidpaw lashed her stumpy tail as anger lit in her eyes. "Emberstar *please*." She mewed, fixing him with her gold and blue gaze. "I've learned more when I've been helping Splashnose and Rootspeckle rather than training with Rootspeckle and Mosspelt."

The leader hesitated and sighed. "When Sunnypaw gets her full name, you'll become their apprentice." He meowed firmly and flicked his tail so she couldn't argue further. "That's what I'm deciding, Orchidpaw." Rising to his paws, he ducked inside of the medicine cat's den. "Splashnose!" He called into the gloom.

"Splashnose went out herb-hunting with Sablepaw and Bumblefall." Answered the airy voice of Sunnypaw as the yellow apprentice came bustling toward him. Her blue eyes were distracted as she shuffled by him, their pelts brushing briefly. "What do you need, Emberstar?" She asked as she went by.

Emberstar felt a flash of surprise at the she-cat's distracted look, but smoothed his fur. "Orchidpaw wants to become you and Splashnose's apprentice when you get your full name." He meowed, and watched as Sunnypaw whipped around and stared at him. "Uh, I told her to wait until you became a full medicine cat first." He added quickly.

Sunnypaw shook her head, her eyes glittering with excitement. "That's great!" She meowed cheerfully as she turned in an excited circle. "We could use more help around here since Sablepaw's going to be a warrior. With an extra pair of paws, Splashnose and I would have more help with herbs and treating other cats." She beamed at him, her blue eyes shining. Her blue eyes slid passed him and she meowed. "Splashnose! Guess what?"

Emberstar turned to see the blue-tabby medicine cat padding into the den, her mouth full of green herbs that smelled tantalizing and sweet. His mouth watered as she walked by, giving him an amused look.

"Do I want to know what you two are up to?" She joked as she set the herbs at her paws and looked between the pair of them. Emberstar felt a prickle of guilt as he recalled his angry mood last time they spoke before he became leader.

Sunnypaw bounced up to her mentor, circling her as she purred happily. "Orchidpaw might become our apprentice when I become a full medicine cat!" She meowed, her eyes shining.

Splashnose's eyes widened a little and she looked over at Emberstar. "Really?" She questioned and flicked her tail thoughtfully. "We could use some more help around here, I suppose." Her ears flicked to the messy nests and piles of unsorted herbs. "And I think you've been such a good apprentice and medicine cat that you've earned your full name." She added, looking warmly at Sunnypaw.

Sunnypaw gawked up at her mentor, her eyes wide with shock. "R-Really?" She sounded awed and surprised as Splashnose nodded. "Th-Thank you, Splashnose! Thank you!" She bounded up to the she-cat and rubbed her cheek against Splashnose's. "I've got to tell my family!" She squeaked and shot out of the den, calling. "Mistlesky! Acornheart! Eggsplash! Owlheart!"

Splashnose blinked after her for a moment before her and Emberstar broke into laughter. "She seems excited." The Clan leader pointed out as he flicked his tail after the energized apprentice. He looked over at Splashnose, his ears flattening to his head. "Look, Splashnose. I'm sorry about how I-"

Splashnose flicked her tail dismissively. "Don't worry about it, Emberstar." She assured him gently, her eyes glittering. "You were going through a lot with Patchsnow's death. I understand."

"But I was so rude!" Emberstar blurted out shamefully as he lowered his head. "I shouldn't have said that to you, a-and I'm sorry."

The medicine cat's voice was sharp as she spoke. "If you apologized for every little thing that happens, 'I'm sorry' would have no meaning." She meowed briskly as Emberstar looked at her again. "Do not waste your breath apologizing for something you didn't want to do." She flicked her tail. "The Clan needs a leader who's stronger than the one who led before them."

Emberstar nodded and dipped his head, rising to his paws. "Thank you, Splashnose." He meowed and padded out of the den. In the clearing, Pebblewhisker was getting some prey and headed into the nursery with a skinny squirrel between his jaws. Adderseed, Nightpaw, Flowerpaw, and Sablepaw were practicing their battle moves, while Branchstripe and Berrystream watched. A pang of suspicioun gripped him as he recalled Berrystream and Adderseed being among the cats Nightstar had named the last time he'd seen her. *What are they up to?* He wondered.

Mistflight and Ravenflame emerged from the warrior's den, chatting like starlings. Their pelts were brushing and their tails were twined together as they headed toward the fresh-kill pile. Emberstar purred as they picked up a sparrow and padded under the Jagged Stone and started to eat. He was glad that Mistflight had gotten over Stemfang, but he was surprised how quickly she moved onto Ravenflame, Stemfang's brother.

Emberstar watched his apprentice as Sablepaw swatted Flowerpaw's shoulder, her eyes gleaming with excitement and determination. Flowerpaw fell beneath her sister's weight, her forepaw pinned to the ground as Sablepaw held her down. Emberstar felt pride spread through him as she looked at Adderseed, who nodded.

"Hey," Emberstar turned as Mistlesky trotted up to him, her eyes warm and grateful as the leader dipped his head. She sat down beside him, watching as Nightpaw leaped on Sablepaw's back and released Flowerpaw. "I wanted to tell you how thankful I am that you're the leader now." She meowed quietly, shifting her blue eyes on him. "Do you remember when you, Stoneblaze, Hollyfire, and I were apprentices when Nightstar died?"

Emberstar thought back to the day where he helped his Clan kill his mother with a shudder. He nodded, blinking at the she-cat. "What

about it?"

Mistlesky's eyes were filled with distant memories that stretched further and further away from the camp. "You and Stoneblaze fought about Shellfur before Nightstar scolded Lichenstar for being too rough." She let out a weightless laugh that carried across the camp, but no cat seemed to hear it. "My point is," she looked over at him with a glint in her eyes. "Stoneblaze wants to retire to the elder's den."

"*What*?" Emberstar stared at the she-cat, wide-eyed. He turned to where Stoneblaze was leaving the elder's den as he chatted with Echospeck, Poppybee, and Tornface, with Halfsnow running to catch up with them. "But you became apprentices before me and my littermates." He argued, turning back to the she-cat. He had to admit, although it pained him, Stoneblaze looked content among the elders. *They'd enjoy younger blood with them in the den.* He considered with a heavy sigh.

"He doesn't feel like he can continue being a warrior," Mistlesky pressed with a slow blink as her brother laughed with the other elders. "He felt helpless when Patchsnow was killed, and training apprentices wears him out quicker than it used to." She gave him a small nudge with her shoulder, her eyes twinkling with knowing. "It would be for the best to not push him further than he can go."

"I know." Emberstar sighed, already feeling the burden of being Clan leader weighing on his shoulders, pressing him into the ground. *If this is what it felt like to be Pebblewhisker,* he thought sourly. *Then I'd rather retire.* He straightened and shook out his fur, looking at Mistlesky. "What about you?" He queried, and Mistlesky tilted her head. "You're the same age as Stoneblaze. Do you want to retire with him?" The leader never forgot that the two siblings- which used to be five, but Dustskip and Petaltail had died or left the Clan and Tornface had retired- did everything together.

Instead, Mistlesky shook her head. "I've got plenty of seasons left in me." She puffed out her chest, her blue eyes shining. "Besides, I want to have a few more litters of kits before my age catches up to me." She laughed, and Emberstar joined her. Her eyes rested on Whiskerflame, who was talking with Russetpelt and Deafears.

Emberstar felt mild amusement as well as warmth that his kin would be so warmly accepted into the Clan. Then, a jolt of unease seized him as Deafears met his gaze and nodded slightly, before looking back at his littermates. *He's training in the Dark Forest,* he shivered, and Mistlesky looked at him in concern.

"Is everything alright?" She asked, her eyes glittering.

Emberstar nodded, his eyes still fixated on the deaf warrior as he rolled his eyes and shook his head to whatever Russetpelt was saying. Turning, back to Mistlesky, he meowed quickly. "O-Of course. Something just startled me. That's all." Playing off his lie, he pushed himself to his paws and dipped his head. "Thank you for telling me about Stoneblaze." He mewed respectfully to the she-cat. "I'll talk to him later about retiring."

Mistlesky nodded. "See you later, Emberstar." She meowed politely before setting off toward Whiskerflame, her tail high in the air as she brushed against his side and sat down beside him.

"Leaffire!" He called as he padded up to the deputy as she chatted with Fennelfur, Mistflight, and Bouldertalon. His heart warmed at the sight of the family talking, and he longed to talk the same way with Mosspelt and Hollyfire.

The brown-and-white tabby deputy turned her head at her leader's call and bid farewell to her family before trotting up to him. "Yes, Emberstar?" She meowed curiously. "You missed a pretty great story about how Fennelfur first learned how to hunt. She ran nose-first into a tree running after a vole!" She purred loudly, and Emberstar couldn't help but join in.

"That's great, Leaffire." Emberstar mewed with a whisk of his tail. When the she-cat settled down, he continued. "I want to keep up the patrols on the NightClan border. OakClan hasn't caused us much of an issue so far, but I don't want the Clan to forget that they still can cause trouble."

Leaffire nodded importantly, her eyes shining. "I'll double the patrols that go to the NightClan border and I'll tell the others to be cautious around the OakClanborder." She meowed and Emberstar

nodded, glad that she understood. "I share the same fears that you do, Emberstar. With NightClan being over aggressive, we need to keep an eye on them as much as possible."

Emberstar blinked at the deputy. She understood his worries. *Thank StarClan.* "Exactly. Keep the younger and inexperienced apprentices away from NightClan's border and make sure they know some basic fighting moves. We want to be prepared just in case Sneezestar and his warriors try something."

Leaffire dipped her head and twitched her ear as the camp entrance rattled and Gingerheart, Pebblewhisker, Flowerpaw, and Moonpaw entered. Three skinny mice dangled by their tails in Pebblewhisker's jaws and a small vole was being carried by Moonpaw.

"We didn't find much," Gingerheart reported as he split apart from the rest of the patrol and came up to Leaffire and Emberstar. He dipped his head to the two of them and flicked his tail. Flowerpaw and Moonpaw are getting better and better at hunting everyday and we caught what we could."

"At least you caught something," Emberstar pointed out, trying to keep the warrior's spirits up. He watched as Pebblewhisker dropped the mice off at the prey pile and Moonpaw slipped inside the nursery with her vole. "Hey, Pebblewhisker?" He called, doing his best not to call him by his leader name. The former leader pricked his ears and looked over at him, his ears twitching. "Can you lead a patrol to the NightClan border? Take whoever you want with you."

The yellow tabby warrior gave a nod of agreement. "Sure thing, Emberstar." He meowed and set off to the warrior's den to fetch the cats he would be taking with him.

Emberstar looked over at Leaffire, who looked amused as she shook her head at him. "What?" He asked, blinking in confusion.

"Oh nothing," she mewed with a polite dip of her head. "See you later, Emberstar." With a knowing grin, she turned around and padded back to join her family, who had slowly started started off to the warrior's den.

***

That night, Emberstar slept fitfully. He tossed and turned in his new nest, which smelled strongly like Pebblewhisker and faintly of thyme that tickled his nose and made him sneeze a few times. After many, many failed attempts at trying to sleep, he got to his feet and padded out of his new den. His pads felt like ice as snow fell heavily on the dark camp as the moon glowed coldly over his head. As he padded onto the Jagged Stone, he gasped at the sheer amount of snow had fallen during the night. He sat down, and the snow fell from the peak and he shuddered.

The moon turned his dark tortoiseshell fur silver, and he breathed in the refreshing cool air. When he breathed out, his breath puffed in front of him and he shook his head. *At least everything seems tame,* he considered for a heartbeat.

Suddenly, the crunch of snow being pressed into the ground alerted him and he pricked his ears, every muscle tense. There was a split second of silence before a single hiss cut through the peaceful cold evening.

"Get to the medicine den, Meadowheart." Emberstar tensed and he lashed his tail as he recognized the voice of Owlflight, OakClan's deputy. "We need whatever catmint they have. Make sure you don't wake the Clan."

Emberstar sprang to his paws, kicking snow off the top of the Jagged Stone and let out a furious yowl. "DawnClan!" He screeched at the top of his lungs. "We're under attack! Wake up!" With a single leap, he was at the bottom of the Jagged Stone and let out yowls of warning.

At once, the clearing came alive as OakClan's warriors burst into the camp and Emberstar unsheathed his claws, ready to defend his camp. He came face-to-face with Goldenstar, who leaped for him, paws outstretched. Emberstar held his ground and reared on his hind legs, ready to meet the OakClan leader.

"DawnClan!" The angered voice of Gingerheart hit his ears as the ginger warrior flung himself at Owlflight, who had ran by the

warrior's den toward Splashnose's cave. "Attack!"

Goldenstar's claws slashed through Emberstar's cheek and blood sprayed the white snow. "We need the herbs, Emberburn." Snarled the golden tabby leader, his eyes narrowed. "Give them up and no cat has to get hurt."

"We need them more, Goldenstar." Emberstar spat back and sank his teeth into the tom's shoulder and tackled him to the ground. The other leader frantically bit into Emberstar's shoulder and clawed at his sides, but Emberstar held on and dealt powerful blows to Goldenstar's belly and chest. "DawnClan won't give them up!"

The clearing suddenly came alive with the sound of battling, screeching cats. The sounds echoed off the snow and every tree and rock. It hurt Emberstar's ears, but he fought Goldenstar swipe for swipe. Goldenstar had picked up some of his mother's moves from training as her apprentice, but Emberstar was quicker and he wriggled free, releasing her teeth from the leader's shoulder and he leaped back, hissing.

There was a second cat beside Goldenstar and Emberstar gasped as a weight slammed into his chest and he was thrown away from the OakClan leader. As he skidded in the snow and scrambled to his paws, he glared at the black-and-white spotted warrior in front of him.

"Swiftsoul," he growled. Goldenstar had gone to help Meadowheart as Splashnose and Sunnyshine swatted at her to defend their den. The OakClan warrior's hazel eyes shone with worry, but a fire sparked in his eyes that Emberstar had to admire.

"Emberburn," the slender warrior replied, his voice a low growl as he lashed his thin tail. Suddenly, his eyes grew pleading and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Please, give us a little catmint." He begged. For a moment, Emberstar dropped his guard. "We have sick queens, elders, kits, and apprentices. We *need* it, Emberburn."

Emberstar hesitated and reluctantly sheathed his claws a little. Then, he remembered Fallingash and her two vulnerable kits. He pictured the elders: Lying in their den while they were sick. He

shook his head and his fury returned. With a snarl, he launched himself at Swiftsoul, who dodged to the side and bit down on his paw and twisted his head, making Emberstar let out a yowl of agony.

"Emberstar!" Splashnose cried as she ran at Swiftsoul, her eyes wide with adrenaline and she crashed into the OakClan warrior, knocking him away with a hiss. Swiftsoul let out a yelp of surprise as the medicine cat arched her back at him, spitting. "Get away from him!" She ordered, her voice fierce. "You cats have no right to be here!"

Swiftsoul bared his teeth, but he bled from a cut above his eye and a wound on his shoulder which bled heavily. "We need catmint, Splashnose." He retorted.

"Then you should have asked instead of trying to steal it." She closed her amber eyes for a heartbeat before she let out a hiss of irritation. "You'd better leave now before any of your warrior get hurt or killed." She told the senior warrior. "You won't be getting catmint from us."

Swiftsoul looked like he was about to argue before a flash of golden tabby fur flew in front of him and Splashnose let out a screech as she rolled on the ground with Goldenstar. The OakClan leader was trying to sink his teeth into her neck when Emberstar sank his teeth into his scruff and hauled him up, clawing his shoulder as he tore him away from Splashnose.

"You're mad!" He spat, glaring at the leader as Goldenstar hissed at him. "Attacking a medicine cat! You're insane!" Emberstar stiffened his shoulders and snarled. "Get out of my camp!"

"Goldenstar!" A wounded Owlflight limped up to his leader, his eyes wide as he took in the scene in front of him. Shaking his head, he looked back at his leader. "We have to get out of here. Meadowheart is badly wounded and Ripplepool is bleeding out."

"Never!" The golden leader glared at his deputy, his eyes a green fire. "We need those herbs, Owlflight. Are you a warrior, or a mouse-hearted kit?"

Owlflight's fur bristled but he bowed his head and turned on Emberstar. The DawnClan leader narrowed his eyes and prepared to defend himself against the strong OakClan deputy. Instead, Owlflight threw his head back and yowled. "OakClan! Retreat!"

Goldenstar turned on his deputy, his eyes narrowed. "Traitor!" He spat, leaping at the brown tom. "I'll kill you!" His teeth bared, Goldenstar sank his teeth deep into Owlflight's shoulder and threw him to the ground.

"Goldenstar!" Swiftsoul lunged for his leader, carrying him off his paws and wrestling with him to the ground. He ended up on top, pinning the large golden leader who writhed and snarled underneath his paws. "End this madness, Goldenstar!" He urged, his eyes wide with distress.

Goldenstar spat at him, kicking him away before scrambling back. His green eyes had a wild light to them and he looked around. Most of the fighting had stopped, but a few skirmishes were still going on. With a hiss, the large tom raced for the camp entrance, Swiftsoul and the other OakClan warriors close behind as they saw their leader fleeing.

Only Owlflight lay on the ground, panting with blood pooling down his injured shoulder. His eyes were glazed in pain as he gasped for air. "I didn't look for this battle," he rasped, looking up at Emberstar. "Goldenstar insisted to fight. He-he said that DawnClan was too weak to fight back and said that if any cat didn't fight, we'd bring shame upon our Clan."

Splashnose struggled to her paws with the help of Leaffire, who had padded up upon seeing the wounded medicine cat. "Did you really need catmint?" She meowed, her voice colored with pain.

Owlflight shook his head, and Emberstar bent over and pulled him to his paws by his scruff. The brown tabby deputy let out a wince as he leaned heavily against the leader's broad shoulder. "Goldenstar is convinced that many of our warriors are sick because they've gotten thin from slow prey." He said, his eyes growing angry. "He's changed since when he became leader. He hardly has a good night's sleep and the rest of the Clan are scared of stepping out of line."

Emberstar's eyes widened. His heart thundered in his chest as he shared a horrified look with Leaffire. "Sunnyshine!" He called and the she-cat pushed her way out of the medicine den and hurried over. Her eyes widened as she saw her former mentor and took Leaffire's place in propping Splashnose up.

"Great StarClan!" She mewed, looking at Owlflight with narrowed, unfriendly eyes. "Did you do this to her?" She demanded, to which Owlflight's eyes widened at her ferocity.

"Of course not!" He retorted, shrinking underneath Sunnyshine's scorn. "I would never attack a medicine cat." Owlflight shook his head, as though trying to clear his mind. "It was Goldenstar. He's been pushing us to be more and more violent and when a cat refuses, he kills them." He closed his eyes, pain washing over him and Emberstar winced in sympathy. "He's already killed Smogshade and he'll kill me if I go back." He seemed defeated, as though the older tom had given up and given into being killed by his tyranic leader.

"Are any cats following him?" Leaffire questioned, her voice riddled with worry as she shared a concerned look with Emberstar.

Owlflight seemed dazed as he swayed on his paws. Emberstar quickly supported the deputy on his shoulder, sharing a worried look with Sunnyshine before wordlessly following the yellow tabby toward the medicine den, Leaffire on the other side of Owlflight. As they entered the cave, Orchidpaw's mew came from inside.

"Sit still, Gingerheart." She scolded, her voice sheepish. "And Fennelfur, let me see that bite." Her voice faded until she spoke clearly again. "Snowhawk, if you keep talking to Mistflight, I'll let your shoulder get infected."

Sunnyshine let out a brief, short purr before she nudged Splashnose toward a mossy nest with feathers. Emberstar did the same for Owlflight and the OakClan deputy uneasily settled into the den in the nest next to Splashnose.

Orchidpaw caught Sunnyshine's eye and let out a sigh. Upon seeing Splashnose, her eyes widened like twin moons that were different

colors. "Is she okay?" She whispered as Sunnyshine padded to her side.

The older she-cat gave her a sympathetic glance before shrugging her smaller shoulders. "Treat Gingerheart and I'll see to Splashnose." She directed, already scooping up the green herbs with yellow buds that Emberstar knew was called marigold. "Gingerheart, if you don't sit still, you can go beg to GlacierClan to treat your wounds."

Emberstar ducked out of the den, not wanting to take up space and he let out a sigh as Bouldertalon and Flowerpaw limped by into Splashnose's den. He dipped his head to them as they passed, and strode into the center of the clearing and gazed around at his battered Clan. The moon glowed coldly over his head and his wounds started to ache. Deciding against going back into the crowded medicine den, he padded toward his den at the top of the Jagged Stone and leaped up the stones, dislodging rocks that fell down as he clawed his way up.

The vines and lichen that hung down from the gray stone swished as he pushed his way inside and headed for the soft nest that was at the far corner of the narrow den. His paw pads ached as he crossed the cold stone floor to his nest and curled up in a tight ball. Letting himself relax, he closed his eyes and drifted into a deep, welcoming sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A raindrop fell onto Emberstar's muzzle. He shook his head, sniffing the air for the scent of prey. The cats on the patrol- Stemfang, Bumblefall, and Moonpaw- followed not far behind as they scanned the forest for prey. A half-moon had gone by since the raid on DawnClan and leafbare had lessened its tight grip on the oak and birch forest. A few cats had gotten sick, and Echospeck had died, but the Clan was slowly strengthening from the harsh weather that left them weak. Stoneblaze had joined the elder's den after Echospeck died, and Owlflight hadn't gone back to OakClan in fear of being killed by Goldenstar. Behind him, Moonpaw whispered.

"I smell a rabbit," the she-cat slid to Emberstar's side and looked up at him, only being a whisker shorter. "Do you want to catch it, or should I?" She asked, her ears flicking to where a plump brown shape was cautiously hopping through the bushes.

Emberstar's mouth watered at the sight of the fat piece of prey and he dropped into a hunting crouch. "I'll funnel it toward you," he meowed quietly to the apprentice. Moonpaw nodded and stalked around a large oak tree and positioned herself behind the rabbit. Gathering his haunches underneath him, Emberstar launched forward, snarling as the rabbit's ears twitched.

With a squeak of terror, the brown animal turned and bounded toward where Moonpaw was lying in wait. There was a hiss from the apprentice as she leaped out from her hiding place, knocking the rabbit to the ground before she lunged for its throat. She killed it cleanly and scooped it up proudly.

"Amazing catch," Emberstar praised, somewhat breathless as he nodded approvingly to her catch. "You're shaping up to be a great hunter, Moonpaw." Turning his head, he mewed to Stemfang and Bumblefall. "Gather your prey. We should surprise the Clan with our prey."

The two warriors nodded and dispersed, heading off to get their

prey and Emberstar headed for an bramble bush and clawed at the earth. As he scraped away the dirt, the scent of vole and mouse hit his nose and he breathed it in deeply. Grabbing his prey in his jaws, he met up with Bumblefall, who was holding a fat pigeon and a squirrel. He nodded to her catch, and the she-cat straightened at his silent praise.

It was nearly sunhigh by the time they got back to the camp and Emberstar was the first to drop his prey off at the fresh-kill pile. Moonpaw was about to set her rabbit down when he flicked his tail to stop her. She looked up at him, confused.

"You can share it with your denmates." He meowed with a twitch of his ears as he saw Mistflight talking with Ravenflame, their pelts brushing lovingly. "I think Flowerpaw and Nightpaw are coming back from a border patrol and Sablepaw should be coming out of the elder's den." Emberstar nodded to the rabbit in her jaws. "That would be a filling meal to all of you."

Moonpaw brightened at his words and nodded, her eyes shining with pride as she turned away and set off toward the apprentice's den. She put the prey down before she sat down next to it, patiently waiting for her denmates to return.

Emberstar turned and watched as the cats around him approached the fresh-kill pile. Swiftly, he scooped up his squirrel and Bumblefall's mouse and headed for Splashnose's den. Since being wounded by Goldenstar, she was being cared for by Sunnyshine and Orchidpaw. Slipping inside the medicine cat's den, he let out a meow of greeting.

Splashnose was talking to Owlflight, who was lounging on his back, his wounded shoulder wrapped with cobwebs and herbs. Her ear flicked and she turned and brightened at the sight of the prey in his jaws. "Is that for us?" She asked eagerly.

Emberstar nodded and gave the mouse to Splashnose and Owlflight before nosing the squirrel to Orchidpaw and Sunnyshine. He approached the OakClan deputy and dipped his head, sitting down beside his nest. "How are you feeling?" He asked.

Owlflight took a bite of the mouse, chewed, and swallowed before swallowing. "Better than I did," he replied earnestly. "Thank you for helping me, by the way." He added to both Emberstar and the medicine cats. "I thought you'd force me to go back to OakClan."

Emberstar shook his head. "We'd never send a cat to their death if there was something we could do to help." He twitched his ears in amusement. "Besides, Splashnose says you aren't such an annoyance. So, we'll keep you around." Owlflight's eyes darkened and Emberstar nudged him. "Would you like to go back to OakClan?"

Owlflight was silent for a moment while he took another bite of the mouse and chewed slowly. Emberstar could see the choices that fought in his head and he shared a glance with Splashnose. *What would happen if he went back?* He wasn't sure he wanted to know. "I'm not sure I can go back," the brown tabby tom answered honestly, looking up at Emberstar. "If I do, Goldenstar will kill me, I know it."

Emberstar dipped his head. "Then, would you like to formally join DawnClan?" He asked kindly. Owlflight seemed stunned, and the leader continued. "I don't want to send you to your death if I can't help it. If Goldenstar will kill you if you go to OakClan, then stay here where you can become stronger with us." He gestured with his tail to Sunnyshine, Splashnose, and Orchidpaw. "What do you say?"

Owlflight looked at Emberstar, his yellow eyes wide. "I-I'm stunned that you'd accept me after attacking you." He spluttered, trying to sit up but being pushed down by Splashnose. "But if you want me here, then I accept your offer."

Emberstar dipped his head, joy filling him as a broad smile plastered across his face. "Wonderful," he purred. Turning to Sunnyshine, he mewed. "I'm planning on making Moonpaw a warrior today as well."

Sunnyshine's eyes widened. "She'd enjoy that," she meowed softly and Orchidpaw nodded in agreement. "Go talk to Mistflight about making her a warrior and we'll get these two ready for the meeting."

"Sounds good to me," the leader meowed and got to his paws, looking at Owlflight. "We'll make you a full warrior of DawnClan before Moonpaw's naming ceremony. You don't need to preform the rituals because of your injury."

Owlflight dipped his head, eyes shining excitedly. "Thank you, Emberstar." He meowed solemnly. "It'd be an honor to serve alongside your Clanmats."

"The honor is all mine, Owlflight." Emberstar meowed respectfully as he strode out of the medicine den. He shook his thick pelt out as a few drops of snowmelt fell on his fur, soaking his skin. "Mistflight!" He called to the pale blue-gray tabby she-cat as she shared tongues with Ravenflame. The she-cat stopped mid lick and looked over at him questioningly. "May I have a word with you?"

Mistflight nodded and nuzzled Ravenflame goodbye before crossing the camp toward her leader. "What can I help you with, Emberstar?" She asked curiously, her eyes bold against her duller coat.

Emberstar angeled his ears to the apprentice's den where Moonpaw, Flowerpaw, Nightpaw, and Sablepaw were sharing tongues with the half-eaten rabbit between them. "Your apprentice made quite the catch today." He observed.

Mistflight's eyes glowed with pride. "Yes, she did." She agreed with a nod. "She's a wonderful apprentice. She's a better hunter and fighter than Flowerpaw, no matter how much she won't admit it."

"She's humble," the leader purred with a flick of his tail. "I think she is ready to become a warrior." He looked back at Mistflight, who looked ready to burst with excitement. "We'll hold the ceremony at once. Don't tell Moonpaw, but you can tell Ravenflame." He nudged her teasingly. "You two have gotten really close over the last few moons."

Mistflight avoided his gaze, stuttering. "W-well...we aren't...I mean...I-I want to-" She cut off as she caught Emberstar's playful smirk.

"Don't worry about it," he purred, amused. "I'll call the Clan

together. Thank you, Mistflight."

The warrior tipped her head to the side in confusion. "What for?" She asked.

Emberstar answered without missing a beat. "For training Moonpaw to be the wonderful soon-to-be warrior she is now." He dipped his head. "She'll be a fine addition to the warrior's den."

"Indeed she will." Mistflight responded with a polite nod before turning away to join Ravenflame, who was chatting with Bouldertalon and Fennelfur.

Emberstar headed for the Jagged Stone and climbed up the harsh rocky incline that led to both his den and the large pointed stone. As he padded up to the peak, he raised his voice to a yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" He loved watching as the entire Clan started to gather. Fallingash poked her head out of the nursery and held Sandkit and Hazekit back from charging out to see what was happening. Snowhsine and Lizardberry padded side-by-side out of the warrior's den and settled down near the back of the group, looking up at Emberstar.

Moonpaw, Flowerpaw, Sablepaw, and Nightpaw sat together, gazing up at Emberstar with wide, innocent eyes that made Emberstar's heart flip over. *They're lucky,* a little voice in his head said. *They get to grow up without the burden of being an evil cats' kit.*

"Cats of DawnClan," he began, his voice trembling slightly. "For a half-moon, Owlflight of OakClan has been living with us to be treated for his wounds from the battle. In that time, I have discussed with him and we both agreed that he would join the Clan as a warrior." No cat protested. One of the cats, Rootspeckle, glanced warmly over at the brown tabby tom as he sat with Sunnyshine, Splashnose, and Orchidpaw outside the medicine cat's den. "Owlflight, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

Owlflight straightened himself and meowed strongly and clearly, despite the pain that lingered in his mew. "I do, Emberstar."

Emberstar nodded to the tom and looked at the cloudy sky. "I, Emberstar, leader of OakClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this warrior. He has escaped the tyranic leadership of another leader and has agreed to live here in DawnClan. Accept him as I accept every cat in the Clan." Looking back down at Owlflight, he went on. "Owlflight, from this moment on, you will be known as Rockheart. Whatever you endured in OakClan, you can grow stronger from it here in DawnClan." He dipped his head to the newly named warrior and went on. "We have one apprentice among us who has trained hard to become a warrior and I will make her a warrior now. Moonpaw, please come forward, young one."

Moonpaw stared up at him in disbelief, but a nudge from Flowerpaw urged her on and she stumbled forward, still in shock.

Emberstar looked over at Mistflight, who was sitting with Stemfang, Ravenflame, and Acornheart. "Mistflight, is your apprentice worthy of being a warrior of this Clan?" He questioned.

Mistflight met his gaze steadily, pride burning in her eyes. "She was worthy the day she became my apprentice." She looked over at Moonpaw, who seemed dazed with excitement. "Moonpaw will be a wonderful addition to the warrior's den. That I am certain." She dipped her head, and Emberstar nodded approvingly.

"I, Emberstar, leader of DawnClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained and fought hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I condemn her a warrior in turn." He rested his gaze on Moonpaw, who got over her shock and stood proudly in the center of the ring of cats. "Moonpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

Moonpaw held her head high as she nodded and answered. "I do." She meowed boldly, her mew ringing throughout the camp.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Moonpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Moonleaf. StarClan honors your determination and motivation and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan." With one leap, he was standing in front of the new warrior and rested his muzzle on her

head. She licked his shoulder and before they pulled away, he murmured in her ear. "Great job, little one." As he stepped back and gazed joyfully at the she-cat, yowling rose around him.

"Rockheart! Moonleaf! Rockheart! Moonleaf!" The Clan cheered and Emberstar flicked his tail, dismissing them.

Lizardberry and Snowshine hurried forward to congratulate their daughter. Lizardberry nodded gratefully to Emberstar while his mate showered Moonleaf in compliments.

"Such a pretty name for such a pretty she-cat!" Snowshine mewed lovingly as she circled her daughter, who seemed embarrassed. "I'll make sure your nest is in the warmest spot and have Flowerpaw, Sablepaw, and Nightpaw get as many feathers as they can to put in your nest so it's soft!"

"Snowshine!" Moonleaf whined, her cheeks flushed a bright pink as she pulled away from her mother. While she looked embarrassed and annoyed, Emberstar purred at the grateful look in her eyes as she looked at her parents. "Warriors shouldn't be fussed over by their mothers!"

Snowshine nuzzled her daughter's cheek affectionately, her eyes glowing so warmly, Emberstar thought that was the reason the snow was starting to melt. "You'll always be a kit to me, Moonleaf." She purred.

As the three cats moved off, Emberstar stretched and looked around, searching for Leaffire. He spotted his deputy leaving Splashnose's den and he approached her. "Something wrong?" He called as he padded up.

Leaffire looked over at him, startled before she smoothed her fur. "Just a belly cramp," she answered calmly. "Nothing a little juniper can't fix." She flicked her ears to the fresh-kill pile, which was comfortably full with mice, voles, squirrels, and a few birds. "Want to share something?"

Emberstar shook his head. "No thank you," he replied. "I'm going for a walk in the forest. When I come back, I'll share a piece of prey

with you by my den." He dipped his head.

The deputy nodded. "Alright. I'll send out a few more patrols before telling the cats that are going on the dawn patrol." She touched her nose to his kindly. "See you later, Emberstar." She purred and trotted off toward the warrior's den.

Emberstar watched her go with a friendly purr before headed for the thorn tunnel. Pushing through the thorns that snagged at his fur, Emberstar took in the scents and sights of the growing forest. Since some of the snow had melted, some of the greenery was growing back and Emberstar welcomed it.

He padded aimlessly through the forest as he let his mind wander. His paws carried him toward the back edge of the territory and the trees thinned before they stopped abruptly and Emberstar tasted the air. There was the slightest scent of a stale fox trail, and a whiff of a few cats wafted up his nose. Pricking his ears forward, he looked around and he felt his ears twitching back and forth curiously.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Meowed the voice of a tom. "I knew we shouldn't have followed your stupid instructions."

"Will you shut your muzzle already, Scorch?" Answered the annoyed and bitter voice of another tom. They sounded older, and Emberstar crouched behind a holly bush. "Look! There's a forest! We can stop, hunt, and rest before leaving again."

The voice of the cat named Scorch groaned. "Father told us to follow the sun," he complained. "Not follow you, Storm."

The pawsteps halted and Emberstar crouched further down, hoping his scent was hidden enough from the outsiders. There was a small thud and a hiss of annoyance and exasperation.

"For mother's sake, what is the matter with-" Scorch's voice cut off.

"Do you smell that?" Storm's voice sounded wary and the two toms emerged from behind a crop of boulders. A large dilute calico tabby tom with yellow eyes tasted the air. Emberstar suspected that he

was Storm and the other cat- a dilute calico tom with yellow-green eyes- was Scorch. "I smell a cat."

"Indeed you do," Emberstar meowed boldly as he got up and padded from the bushes. At once, both cats tensed and stood shoulder-to-shoulder. He noticed their bristling fur and fluffed out his pelt, trying to not look hostile. "Don't worry; I'm not looking for a fight."

Scorch looked skeptical and cleared his throat. "We aren't either," he meowed warily as he looked Emberstar up and down. "Who are you?"

Storm gave Scorch a hard shove. "Shut up for once, fox-heart!" He growled and sized Emberstar up. "We're just passing through. There's no need for a fight unless you give us no choice." He flattened his ears to his head as Emberstar blinked. "It's two against one."

Emberstar felt a pang of admiration for the tom being so brave. He dipped his head, holding his gaze. "I told you, I'm not looking for a fight." He drew in a breath and picked up the scent of blood. "Are one of you hurt?"

Storm glared at Scorch out of the corner of his eye. "I thought you said you took care of your leg!" He scolded, and Scorch bristled.

"It must've reopened on our pointless walk here!" Scorch flashed back at him. He turned back to Emberstar, who was just watching the exchange. "We got in a scuffle with a fat old kittypet who wouldn't let us pass through his garden."

Storm sniffed scornfully. "This one isn't much of a fighter," he looked at Scorch then back at Emberstar. "Well, if you aren't looking for a fight, who are you?" He looked the leader up and down. "You don't look or smell like a kittypet." His voice was still wary, but both toms got out of their defensive stances.

"You're right: I'm not a kittypet. My name is Emberstar, leader of DawnClan." He mewed, pointing with his tail behind him. "We live in the middle of the forest. If you want, I can take you there and your wound can be treated, you can eat as much as you like, and

you can rest." He offered.

Scorch's yellow-green eyes widened and he took a step forward. "Really?" His mouth hang open and his eyes gleamed hungrily. "That'd be great!"

Storm still seemed skeptical. "I suppose a little break can't hurt," he meowed hesitantly after a while. He looked at Emberstar. "Can you show us where you live?" He asked.

Emberstar's tail flicked as he nodded. "Of course. Please follow me." Turning around, he led the two toms into the forest.

***

"Who are those two?"

"Emberstar, behind you!"

"What a strange scent they carry."

"I smell blood. Is any cat hurt?"

Emberstar felt the fur on his neck bristle as he entered the camp with the two loners in tow behind him. He saw Leaffire gazing at him in shock, and blinked at her. *We'll talk later.* "Cats of DawnClan!" He meowed loudly, and the murmuring fell into an uneasy silence. "These cats are in need of shelter and prey, they will remain here for as long as they want. I expect all of you to treat them with respect." He looked around at his Clanmates. "Mosspelt, take them to the medicine cat's den to get their injuries treated. Stemfang and Ravenflame, you two make nests in the apprentice's den." Turning to the loners, he added. "You'll be sleeping there since the warrior's den is crowded."

Scorch looked eager at the mention of sleeping and as Mosspelt padded up, he looked at her. "Hello," he mewed, his tone friendly.

"H-Hi." Mosspelt meowed quietly and led the tom toward Splashnose's den. "Follow me."

Storm stayed with Emberstar, eyeing the rest of the Clan suspiciously. "Are you sure it's safe for us to be here?" He meowed quietly to the leader. "They don't look like they like us."

"Of course it's safe," Emberstar turned around to see Rockheart padding up to them. Storm's fur bristled, but the brown tabby warrior ignored it. "My name is Rockheart. What's yours?"

"Storm," the dilute calico tabby tom meowed stiffly and nodded to where Mosspelt and Scorch disappeared into Splashnose's den. "That's Scorch, my littermate."

Rockheart nodded. "Welcome to DawnClan, Storm." He meowed and looked at Emberstar. "Are they kittypets?" He asked.

Storm rounded on the tom, teeth bared and fur bristling. "Of course not!" He spat, and Rockheart's eyes flashed. "We would never live with Twolegs in their wretched dens." He dug his claws into the earth as anger burned brightly in his yellow eyes. "Our mother was a kittypet, but our father was from a group called OakClan. Ever heard of it?"

Emberstar's heart sank as he nodded slowly. Rockheart looked at the loner, eyes wide with shock. "OakClan is our neighbor," he meowed. "They're a bunch of fox-hearts." Examining Storm more closely, he could see the tell-tale signs that this cat had some Clan blood in him. His broad shoulders, huge paws, and broad muzzle made it clear that this cat was half-Clan. "Who was your father?"

"A loner named Apple," the half-Clan tom replied, a little less defensive now. "He had a yellow pelt and blue eyes. He told Scorch and I stories about being leader of OakClan with the name of Applestar. Heard of him?"

Rockheart swallowed and looked nervous. "I have," he squeaked, and Emberstar shot the tom a confused look out of the corner of his eye. "I was part of OakClan when Applestar was leader. He left the Clan with his new mate and kits when Nightstar became a warrior."

Storm looked confused. "Who's Nightstar?"

"No one important." Answered Rockheart with an apologetic look at Emberstar, who shrugged. He knew his mother's name was disgraced, but he didn't care as much now.

"Storm!" Scorch's gleeful voice interrupted their conversation as the dilute calico tom padded up with Sunnyshine and Splashnose on either side, purring with amusement.

"Scorch," the tom responded and touched noses with his brother. "Did they help your leg?"

It was Splashnose who answered. "We did. It's infected, so you'll have to stay for a few days in order for it to clear up." She looked at Scorch, who puffed out his chest. "He's told us about your guys' journey. Where do you plan on going, anyway?" She asked, resting her eyes on Storm.

Storm shrugged his powerful shoulders. "Our mother told us to go to a lake with four Clans surrounding it with pine forests, moorland, and oak forests." He shared a glance with Scorch. "I suppose we found you."

Emberstar dipped his head. "I'm going to see what Leaffire needs," he meowed to Splashnose and blinked at the two loners. "Splashnose will show you to the apprentice's den and I'll make sure you get prey and moss." He blinked at the two toms and padded away to find his deputy.

Leaffire was deep in conversation with Pebblewhisker. The former leader had struggled to gain the trust of the warriors around him, but Leaffire had stuck by his side through the harsh judgement of the Clan and become close friends with the warrior. The deputy's ear flicked as he approached and she looked over her shoulder. She murmured something to Pebblewhisker before she met Emberstar.

"Leaffire," he meowed, feeling suddenly awkward. "May I have a word with you in my den?" Emberstar asked, his gaze briefly flicking to Pebblewhisker then back at his deputy.

Leaffire nodded coolly. "Sure. See you later, Pebblewhisker." She meowed and touched noses with the tom before following

Emberstar toward the Jagged Stone. As they climbed up the rocky slope to the leader's den, Leaffire was completely silent. Only when they entered the den did she speak. "Why would you let two loners reside in the Clan when we don't even know them?" Her tone was challenging, and Emberstar faced her.

"Because they needed help," he meowed with a twitch of his ears. "I went for a walk and came upon them about to enter the territory. When I was talking to them, I smelled blood and they said that they'd been travelling and they need prey and somewhere to rest."

The brown-and-white tabby she-cat lashed her thin, sleek tail back and forth and hissed. "We don't know them, Emberstar!" She repeated hotly. "How can we trust them? What if they're spies?"

Emberstar rolled his bright purple eyes in annoyance. "Are you mouse-brained?" He growled as he looked at Leaffire, trying to keep his growing irritation under control. "Do they look fit enough to be spies? One of them is injured, Leaffire. Honestly, I thought you'd hold your judgement in and be a little kinder than that to those two."

Leaffire looked frustrated. "Why do you say that?" She glared at him, anger growing in her eyes.

"Because *I'm* the Clan leader!" Emberstar hissed through gritted teeth. All his feelings about being judged for being the son of Nightstar streamed out and he started to shake. Leaffire took notice and pricked her ears. "I understand them, Leaffire. I want them to feel comfortable around us but I can't if the Clan scorns them for simply being loners." Bitterness crept into his mew and his claws scraped against the stone floor of the den. "If you don't like my decision, that's fine. But you can at least respect it."

"Emberstar, I-" Leaffire began, but the leader shook his head.

"Go back to Pebblewhiser." He growled, his mood soured. "Leave me be." He heard a resigned sigh come from his deputy and felt the vibrations of her fleeting pawsteps through the cold stone as she left the den. Emberstar bit his tongue to stop himself from hissing aloud and he padded to his nest and flopped down, burying his face in his

paws as he screwed his eyes shut.

***

Emberstar was woken by the sound of paws thundering into his den and a chorus of squeaks as Sandkit and Hazekit leaped on him, smothering him in their soft, fluffy fur. He jerked awake, eyes wide and unfocused as the kits scampered all over him.

"We got you!" Hazekit squealed as he pummeled the leader's belly with his soft forepaws. Sandkit sank her thorn-sharp teeth into Emberstar's ear and tugged hard.

"Sandkit! Hazekit!" There was a call from outside the den and the kittens froze. It was Fallingash and she sounded annoyed and concerned. "For StarClan's sake, where did you go?"

"Uh-oh," Emberstar mused as he sat up and tumbled Hazekit off his belly with a paw and the kit fell into the nest with a soft *thump*. "Busted." Stiffly, he rose to his paws headed for the den entrance, the two kits running after him. Their short legs and small paws making it hard to catch up. By the time he was on top of the Jagged Stone, the kits had caught up and were panting from their short run.

"Wow!" Breathed Sandkit as she stared at the camp from the top of the stone. Her gaze flitted over every den, taking in every little detail. "The camp looks so small from up here!"

"Yeah!" Hazekit agreed as he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his sister. "I can see the nursery!" He mewed and pointed with a small paw to the bracken and bramble den that was next to the elder's den. Suddenly, he looking in the middle of the clearing and waved a paw at a cat. "Hi, Fallingash!" He called down to his mother.

Fallingash looked up and shrieked in horror. "What are you two doing up there?" She cried as she stared at her two kits as they stood at the highest place in the camp. "Get down! You can get hurt!"

"We're fine!" Sandkit puffed as she took a few small steps closer to

the edge. Emberstar's heart started to pound as she did, imagining the kit falling and landing soundlessly on the ground below. He shifted closer in case something happened. "Emberstar's with us!"

"Get down from there this instant!" Fallingash ordered, stamping her paw on the ground. "Or I'll kick you from our nest and you'll have to sleep on the ground!"

Hazekit stepped back from the edge. He turned and fled down the Jagged Stone. "No! No!" He wailed, sloppily leaping down the boulders and raced for his mother, who sniffed his pelt and looked up at Sandkit, who stayed put.

"You'd better go to your mother," Emberstar meowed, taking a step toward the kit. Sandkit turned around, looking indignant with her tail sticking straight up in the air.

"But I like it up here!" She complained. "It's nice and breezy!"

Emberstar shook his head and leaned forward, reaching for the kit's scruff. He stopped as an idea popped in his mind. Leaning back, he studied the little cat. "I have an idea," he meowed, getting Sandkit's attention at once. "Get on my back and I'll take you down to Fallingash. I'll jump down from the stone. How does that sound?"

Sandkit's pale blue eyes glowed with excitement and she nodded. Emberstar crouched down and she clambered onto his back, sinking her sharp claws into his fur and making him wince. Rising to his full height, Emberstar took a few steps back before bounding forward and leaping from the Jagged Stone. Above him, Sandkit let out a shriek of excitement and joy as Emberstar's paws hit the ground.

"Sandkit!" Hazekit gasped as he ran up to the leader as his littermate slid off his back. "That was awesome!"

Fallingash hurried forward to sniff her daughter as Hazekit asked how it felt to be in the air for so long. She looked up at Emberstar. "Thanks for getting her down. It was an interesting idea, but thank you." She mewed and herded her two kits toward the nursery. "You can tell us all about being in the air, Sandkit. But first, I need to get

you cleaned up."

As the kits chattered with their mother, Emberstar looked around to find no cat in the clearing. Alarmed, he headed for the warrior's den and poked his head inside. "Leaffire?" He called.

A head popped up and the dark blue eyes of Branchstripe. "E-Emberstar?" He meowed, sounding tired. *He must have been on the dawn patrol.* Emberstar decided.

"Where's Leaffire?" The leader asked, his tail flicking back and forth.

"I don't know." Branchstripe yawned and rested his chin back on his paws. "I think she went on a patrol."

Emberstar huffed in irritation and retreated out of the den. He looked around the camp again and saw Tornface following Stoneblaze and Poppybee out of the elder's den. The tom padded over and greeted them quickly. "Have either of you seen Leaffire?"

Tornface spoke before the others. "I saw her leaving the camp with Storm before dawn when I came back from the dirtplace." She meowed, nudging Stoneblaze. "Did you scent her when you went to get a drink?"

The younger elder looked thoughtful before nodding. "If I'm remembering correctly, they were heading to the Gathering Island border." He mewed.

Emberstar didn't wait to hear more and took off to the camp entrance. Bursting through the thorn tunnel with thorns clinging to his thick pelt. He ran throught the forest, not caring if he scared off any prey. His heart was racing as he sprinted as fast as he could through the trees to get to the border with the Gathering Island. He pricked his ears as he heard screeching and hissing ahead and his heart sank to his belly. *Cats are fighting!* He burst through the trees to see Storm and Leaffire wrestling together. Blood oozed from a bite on the deputy's shoulder and the loner bled heavily from a deep gash on his shoulder. *No!*

Storm pinned Leaffire to the ground and lunged for her throat. He

sank his teeth deep into her neck and Emberstar darted forward, catching the loner by surprise and tackling him off Leaffire. Claws hooked him in return as the tom fought hard. Emberstar sank his teeth into the tom's shoulder as Storm clawed his sides. Pain exploded in his belly as his hind paws churned into his underbelly and his claws tore at the flesh.

With a screech of agony, Emberstar flung the tom to the ground and rolled away, springing to his paws and glaring at the loner. "Why are you doing this?" He growled, his tail lashing as the tom scrambled to his paws. "We're taking care of you and your brother!"

"You and your Clan are weak!" Spat Storm as he charged, raking his claws down the side of Emberstar's face and leaping away. "Do you really think we came here on accident? I was told to come here by my father. He said that you Clan cats value nothing beyond yourselves and the land that feeds you."

"That's not true!" Emberstar retorted, the side of his face beginning to burn as he darted forward and slashed Storm's side. Teeth sank into his tail and he let out a shriek of pain as he was dragged backward, claws sinking into his hind legs and pulling him to the ground. "We take care of one another!"

"Fox-dung!" Storm snarled as he flipped the leader onto his back and slashed his chest, spraying blood into the air. "My brother might be fooled by your ways, but I am not!" He yowled and lashed out to rake his throat.

Emberstar turned his head just in time and dug his claws into Storm's chest. The loner didn't move as he bared his teeth in anger. *I can't keep this up for long,* he thought as he felt his legs start to tire.

"Give up already." The dilute calico tabby tom hissed as blood trickled down his shoulder. "You've lost. Your deputy is dead and you will be in a heartbeat."

"Never!" A shriek of defiance shocked Emberstar as Leaffire flung herself at Storm and shoved the loner off her leader. The she-cat's throat was bleeding heavily and it stained her brown-and-white chest. Leaffire trembled from blood loss but she stood strongly as

Emberstar scrambled to his paws, panting as they faced Storm who hissed at them.

"You may have won this fight," he lashed his tail angrily, defeat rising in his eyes. "But you will never win." With a flick of his ear, he turned and limped into the trees.

Emberstar was tempted to chase the tom away when Leaffire fell against him, trembling. He looked at his deputy, who was wasting away at his paws, wheezing and panting. "Don't worry, Leaffire." He meowed, beginning to panic. "I'll get you home." Sinking his teeth into her scruff, he hauled her onto his back and ran into the trees toward the camp.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Emberstar sat impatiently outside the nursery with Sablepaw at his side. He could hear Sunnyshine's voice inside, soothing Snowshine as she kitted. Splashnose had tasked her to help the queen give birth while she helped Leaffire with her injuries. To keep the Clan moving while Leaffire was in the medicine den, he'd appointed Gingerheart as the temporary deputy while Leaffire recovered.

A sharp, painful cry from inside the nursery made Sablepaw flinch and she looked up at her mentor. "Will Snowshine be okay?" She asked in concern, her tail curling around herself comfortingly.

The leader nodded. "She's had kits before. She'll be just fine with this litter." He felt confident in his words, but Sablepaw didn't seem too convinced. "Hey." He nudged her gently. "Don't worry; Sunnyshine is a wonderful medicine cat and she knows what she's doing."

"I know," Sablepaw sighed, her eyes dark with worry as Snowshine cried out again. "Moonleaf and I are really close, and Stemfang and Ravenflame seem to fit in with the Clan so well."

He noticed his apprentice seemed resigned and rested his tail across her shoulders comfortingly. "When Snowshine is done kitting, I'll take you battle training." He meowed and Sablepaw brightened. "I know the only experience you've had is against a fox, which isn't the best introduction to the world of fighting. But, that was just bad luck, I guess."

Sablepaw shot her mentor a worried look. "What about your injuries?" She asked, pressing a paw to his chest and he winced, feeling pain spark up his chest. "Surely they aren't fully healed by now."

"I'll be fine, Sablepaw." He assured her, trying to swallow back the pain that grew in his body. It had been over a quarter-moon since he and Leaffire drove Storm out of the Clan and Leaffire was still

confined to the camp and had to have her wounds redressed hourly.

There was a loud, agonized cry and Sunnyshine let out a triumphant *mrrow*. "You've done it, Snowshine! Congratulations." Her fluffy yellow face came out of the den. "Lizardberry, you have three daughters and two sons." She purred, sounding somewhat breathless.

Lizardberry looked eager to meet his new kits and slipped by the medicine cat and disappeared into the nursery. His purr sounded from inside and it shook Emberstar's head like a horde of bees.

"How many litters has Snowshine had?" Sablepaw asked Sunnyshine as she approached the leader.

"Three," answered the she-cat as she sat down in front of the two cats. Looking up at Emberstar, she added. "All five kits are healthy and strong. They'll make it through the night." She sounded pleased with herself and Emberstar nodded approvingly.

"You're a skilled medicine cat, Sunnyshine." He meowed respectfully with a polite dip of his head. "Thank you."

Sunnyshine lapped at her chest fur bashfully, her ears flattening against her head. "Thanks," she meowed, embarrassed.

Emberstar blinked warmly at her and rose to his paws. "Come on, Sablepaw." He meowed and raised his voice to call across the camp. Adderseed! Stemfang! Fennelfur!" His call alerted the cat around him, but their pelts smoothed.

Since driving Storm out of the forest, Scorch had become an apprentice, becoming Scorchpaw and the apprentice of Fennelfur. He was a little clumsy and struggled to keep up with the daily routine of checking elder's for ticks, patrolling, and learning how to hunt and fight. However, Fennelfur was a strong and independent warrior and Emberstar knew she'd teach him what he needed to know to become a warrior.

Adderseed poked his head from the warrior's den and trotted over. "What's up, Emberstar?" He meowed curiously.

"Find your apprentices, we're going to practice some battle moves today." He mewed briskly with a flick of his tail. "Sunnyshine," he looked at the medicine cat. "Can you get Orchidpaw? I want her to have at least a little bit of battle knowledge."

Sunnyshine nodded. "Sure." She rose to her paws and padded off toward the medicine cat's den. As she left, Emberstar looked at Adderseed who was joined by Stemfang and Fennelfur, he blinked at them.

"We're taking the apprentices into the forest for some battle training," he explained. He looked at Fennelfur. "Where's Scorchpaw?"

"Coming." Replied the senior warrior as she looked over her shoulder. Scorchpaw was bustling out of the apprentice's den with Flowerpaw and Nightpaw chattering up a storm beside him. Emberstar couldn't help but feel unnerved by how the she-cats looked at him. Their eyes shone admirably and Emberstar silently wondered what was so great about the older tom that appealed to them.

"About time," snorted Adderseed as he looked disapprovingly at his apprentice, who looked at her paws. "We could've been in the forest already if we didn't wait."

Fennelfur gave him a hard shove and glared him. "Don't be impatient," she scolded, and Adderseed replied with a hiss but said nothing. Turning back to the apprentices, she added. "You're quite on time." She purred and looked at Emberstar. "We're ready."

"Then let's get out there!" Emberstar meowed and led the way toward the camp entrance, the other cats on his heels.

***

"Try again, Flowerpaw." Stemfang advised, his tone light as Flowerpaw was pinned to the ground by Sablepaw. "Make sure to balance your weight before leaping."

"You're doing great, Sablepaw." Emberstar encouraged as his apprentice sprang back off her littermate. "Keep yourself on your toes and don't let her size get the better of you!"

Sablepaw and Flowerpaw circled each other, their eyes intense and focused. When Flowerpaw lashed out with a sheathed paw and aimed for Sablepaw's shoulder, the other she-cat jerked out of range and swatted Flowerpaw's paw out of the way.

As they sparred, Emberstar looked over at Scorchpaw and Nightpaw. The larger apprentice rained blows on Nightpaw's head, but the she-cat ducked and slammed her paws into his chest, knocking him off-balance and throwing him off guard.

"Flowerpaw's training is coming along nicely," the leader commented with a proud look at Stemfang. "You're a great mentor to her." He added when his former apprentice said nothing.

"She's a fantastic apprentice," the ginger-and-white pointed warrior meowed with an approving nod to his apprentice as she dodged a blow from Sablepaw. "Always ready to learn and picks things up quicker than I thought she would."

"They all remind me of Branchstripe and Coppersight." Emberstar meowed softly. "So driven and determined to prove themselves while also being hard-working and independent cats."

Stemfang let out a little purr of agreement. "Branchstripe never stops boasting about how great their training is coming along. Even when they aren't around."

Emberstar nodded. "He'll always be a proud father. No matter how old his kits are." They sat in a proud silence as they watched their apprentice's spar.

Sablepaw ducked as Flowerpaw tried to cuff her ears and reared on her hind legs, swatting at her sister's cheek before going for a pounce that would pin her to the ground. Flowerpaw was faster though and dodged out of the way and slammed her paws into Sablepaw's side and the oak-brown she-cat fell onto her right side

with an *oomph.* Flowerpaw panted as she put her front paws on her side and looked at her mentor. A small cut above her nose bled a little, but other than that, her green eyes were shining.

Stemfang flicked his tail, signalling the spar was over and Flowerpaw had won. As the two apprentices shook out their fur and padded toward their mentors, the tom began speaking. "Flowerpaw, you fought well against Sablepaw. Even when she'd beaten you, you didn't give up." The rustic tabby apprentice seemed to glow at her mentor's praise, and Emberstar cleared his throat.

"Sablepaw, you are a quick and fierce fighter. Your tactics and counter moves are admirable, even if you think of them on the fly." Sablepaw's eyes shone brightly and he went on. "I think it is time that you three become warriors." He meowed and both apprentices looked at him with wide eyes. "You've fought through the hard moons of leafbare and fought well against the fox." He looked at Sablepaw, a lump growing in his throat as he remembered the sudden attack. "When we get back to camp, we'll hold your ceremony."

"Thank you, Emberstar!" Flowerpaw mewed, her eyes gleaming with pride and excitement.

Emberstar dipped his head to both she-cats. "My pleasure." He purred and shared an amused look with Stemfang.

***

As they returned to the camp, Emberstar bounded across the clearing and climbed up the stones that led to his den. Padding up the Jagged Stone until he was sitting at the top, he yowled. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!"

The Clan gathered and Sandkit and Hazekit bundled out of the elder's den with the elders on their heels. They let out squeaks of excitement as they sat at the base of the Jagged Stone, staring up at Emberstar with wide, eager eyes. Emberstar purred at waved a paw at them. They wouldn't be made apprentices for another two moons, but they thought they were ready. Fallingash padded out of

the nursery, yawning. The queen must've been taking a nap before Emberstar called the meeting. Upon seeing her kits, she let out a meow and the two kits scampered over and sat down with her. Now that they were weaned from her milk, they could sit with them during the meetings but had to be kept away from the center.

"Cats of DawnClan," he began, his voice laced with pride. "We have three apprentices among us who are ready to receive their warrior names. Sablepaw, Flowerpaw, Nightpaw, please come forward." The apprentices strode forward with their heads held high. "Sablepaw, Flowerpaw, Nightpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

"I do," Sablepaw was the first to answer, her voice strong and confident.

"I do." Flowerpaw echoed, her eyes gleaming with excitement and pride. Eagerness brimmed her words and she seemed about ready to burst with excitement.

"I do." Nightpaw declared, and Emberstar nodded approvingly.

"I, Emberstar, leader of DawnClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I condemn them as warriors in turn." He looked at the three she-cats. "Sablepaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Sablestorm. StarClan honors your skill in battle and your quick-wits and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan." Emberstar leaped down from the Jagged Stone and rested his muzzle on Sablestorm's head. The warrior licked his shoulder and stepped back. "Flowerpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Flowerwing. StarClan honors your speed and determination and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan." He repeated the ritual with Flowerwing and the warrior licked his shoulder. Turning to Nightpaw, his heart skipped a beat as he saw the apprentice morph into his mother. Blinking, the image of his mother vanished and the eager apprentice was beaming at him eagerly. "Nightpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Nightwind. StarClan honors your strength and honor and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan." After he rested his muzzle on her head and she licked his shoulder, a chorus of

cheers split the air.

"Sablestorm! Flowerwing! Nightwind!"

***

DawnClan were the last to file into the Gathering Island, led by Emberstar with Gingerheart at his side. Leaffire's wounds were slowly healing, but he wanted to make sure she was approved by Sunnyshine and Splashnose before she returned to her duties. As they mingled with the other Clans, pelts started to bristle. Emberstar felt the eyes of every cat burning into his pelt as he clawed his way up the High Tree and settled on a branch by himself.

"About time you arrived," Goldenstar snarled out of the corner of his mouth. Emberstar's fur bristled angrily, but he said nothing.

"Cats from all Clans!" Sneezestar yowled, quieting the conversations that the cats had eased into. "Let this moon's Gathering begin!"

"I'd like to start this Gathering off." Sparrowstar meowed and rose to her paws. "We have two new warriors. Please welcome Maplewood and Nettlefoot!" Murmurs of congratulations came from the cats below the leaders, but they sounded half-hearted and forced. "We also have a full nursery and the warrior's den is full. That is all I have to report." The she-cat dipped her head and sat back down.

Goldenstar stood up before Sneezestar or Emberstar could. "OakClan has suffered the loss of our deputy, Owlflight in a battle with DawnClan a half-moon ago." He growled and sent Emberstar a toxic glare. "Splinterstorm is our deputy now and we have Blackberrythorn as a full medicine cat and Tumblespring, Larchdust, Rosefall, Shinesong, and Stormclaw as warriors." No cat cheered for the new warriors, deputy, and medicine cat. "That is all I have to report." He sat back down, pelt bristling.

"If I may," Emberstar interjected as Sneezestar was about to stand up. "I'd like to go next." The NightClan leader looked at him before nodding and sitting back down. "DawnClan has one full medicine cat, a new medicine cat apprentice, eight new warriors, and one

new apprentice. Please welcome Sunnyshine, Orchidpaw, Rockheart, Snowhawk, Snakefoot, Rootspeckle, Moonleaf, Sablestorm, Flowerwing, Nightwind, and Scorchpaw." There were a few cheers, but Emberstar noticed the Clans were tense. "And Pebblestar has stepped down from being leader. I am the new leader and Leaffire is my deputy, but she is unable to preform her duties. Gingerheart stands in her place for the time being." He sat back down and nodded to Sneezestar.

"NightClan has no new warriors, but Shredsplash has given birth to three kits." There were purrs of congratulations from all the Clans. *Kits are a welcome occurrence, no matter the Clan.* "Other than that, newleaf is bringing fish back into the streams and rivers and we are doing well."

"Then I declare this Gathering at an end." Goldenstar growled as he pushed himself to his paws and leaped down from the High Tree. "Go to your leader and leave." At once, he was swarmed by his Clanmates and disappeared into the trees.

"Who put a thorn in his nest?" Sparrowstar muttered to Emberstar and the tom shrugged. He didn't care what was up with the rude leader. His only concern was if he was planning something against his Clan. "Goodnight, you two." Her tone was somewhat kind as she leaped down and vanished in a sea of GlacierClan warriors.

Emberstar shared a confused look with Sneezestar before leaping down after the tabby she-cat. "Sparrowstar!" He called and the GlacierClan leader stopped and looked over her shoulder. Her eyes flickered questioningly. He met her gaze steadily. "I think we should be wary of Goldenstar. We don't know what he's planning; if he's planning anything at all."

Sparrowstar gave her ear a flick at Stormfern and the deputy led her Clan toward their territory. The leader padded toward Emberstar and looked at him. "I understand your fears, Emberstar." She mewed. "But whatever that mouse-brain is planning, we should do what we can to protect our Clans. Not together- but apart." Something about her tone made the fur on his shoulders rise. "Goodnight, Emberstar." She turned around and trotted after her Clan.

"Hmmm." Emberstar turned to Gingerheart, who had joined him at his side. "I want you to double the patrols that go near the OakClan border." He meowed and Gingerheart nodded in agreement. "If Goldenstar is planning an attack, we need to be ready."

Chapter Twenty-Six

For the first time since Nightstar's death, Emberstar felt trapped. In the days since the Gathering, Emberstar had ordered more patrols go to OakClan's border with twice as many warriors. No apprentice would go there without at least four warriors with them. He knew he was working his Clan to the bone, but until Goldenstar got his head out of the clouds, Emberstar had no other option than to wait to see what he would do. Leaffire's injuries from Storm- now a warrior of OakClan by the name of Stormclaw- hadn't fully healed and she moved into the elder's den. Gingerheart was now the full deputy and Emberstar itched to tell him about his fears.

Sablestorm and her hunting patrol pushed through the thorn tunnel with prey dangling from their jaws. Despite their hefty haul, Emberstar was deeply troubled for the younger cats in the Clan. If Goldenstar did attack, would he go as far as to kill kits? What if they weren't safe hunting and patrolling the territory anymore? A shiver ran through him and he gulped, casting the elder's den a worried look. Now that the den was packed, Emberstar feared that they would be a target should Goldenstar attack.

A light touch on his shoulder made him turn to see Rockheart standing in front of him. The older warrior looked concerned and Emberstar looked at the uneaten sparrow that lay at his paws. "Emberstar, can we talk?" Rockheart mewed and without looking up at him, the leader nodded and got to his paws. "Let's go to your den." Leading the way up the rocks and entering the leader's den, Emberstar faced the warrior, ears twitching. Rockheart took a deep breath and met his gaze. "The Clan knows you're scared of what might happen with Goldenstar."

Emberstar's ears drew back slightly. He let out a heavy sigh. "Is it really that obvious?" He shook his head and looked at Rockheart, whose green eyes glowed with worry and a deep sense of pain. "We have to assume Goldenstar is planning an attack. Can you fetch Gingerheart, Leaffire, Fennelfur, Pebblewhisker, Hollyfire, Mosspelt,

Adderseed, and Branchstripe?" Rockheart nodded. "Thank you. I don't want to do anything else without their input. I want your opinion as well." He added.

Rockheart blinked gratefully at him before heading out of the den. As the curtain of lichen closed behind him, Emberstar realized how much he depended on the opinions of others and he felt a stir of alarm at the fact. *I really can't do anything by myself,* he thought, blinking down at the stone floor.

Pawsteps alerted him and he looked up to see Gingerheart's bright ginger face followed by the other cats who he'd named. Including, Emberstar noticed, Splashnose, Sunnyshine, and Orchidpaw.

"You wanted to see us?" Branchstripe prompted as they settled near the back of the den so they all could fit in.

Emberstar nodded and swept his tail around so they could sit. Taking a deep breath, he meowed. "I fear for our Clan. Goldenstar is acting out of the ordinary and I expect him to launch an attack on us sooner rather than later. We need to be prepared if he does. However, doubling patrols on the OakClan border isn't enough." No cat spoke. "Any ideas?"

No cat spoke for what felt like moons until Pebblewhisker cleared his throat. "When Nightstar joined OakClan and DawnClan together, some of us were forced to live alongside Vixenpool's warriors when she was leader." Leaffire, Rockheart, and Fennelfur nodded. "Goldenstar was her first apprentice, but she treated him like Halfthroat treated her."

"How was that?" Emberstar flicked his tail at Splashnose's curious question.

Rockheart shuddered and Fennelfur pressed against him comfortingly as he began to speak. "Halfthroat pushed Nightstar to be ruthless and cold-hearted. How do you think Goldenstar is becoming more and more of a brute? I suspected Nightstar was seeing him in his dreams, But I didn't want to believe it." He dropped his gaze to his paws. "Now I know for certain she is."

"Even if Nightstar is influencing Goldenstar's actions," Leaffire mewed with a wave of her tail. "He will mainly target GlacierClan and us. Nightstar hated GlacierClan, and she hates us because we were the main ones to kill her."

Sunnyshine looked at Leaffire in confusion. "Why not NightClan?" She asked. "She combined three of the four Clans, why doesn't she hate NightClan?"

Leaffire shrugged. "She's half-NightClan. Maybe she doesn't care because she shares their blood." Turning to Emberstar, she added. "She'll have Goldenstar fight as ruthless as she did. If they attack, we'll suffer from the loss of cats."

Emberstar shifted in his nest uncomfortingly, suddenly feelings as though thorns were digging into his flesh. "Splashnose," he looked at the medicine cat, who was deep in thought. She jumped when he spoke to her, like a cat falling into cold water. "What do you think?"

Instead of Splashnose, Orchidpaw spoke out. "I don't think we should take the risk of losing our warriors and apprentice." She mewed, her voice so quiet Emberstar had to strain his ears just to make out her words. "We should stay away from provoking OakClan as much as possible. That way, we don't have to fight."

There was a moment of silence, then Adderseed let out a snarl that made Orchidpaw shrink beneath her creamy fur. "We're warriors," the tom growled, his claws scraping against the stone floor. "We don't back down from a fight."

Gingerheart shot the warrior a disapproving glance. "We also don't throw ourselves into fights without good reason." He retorted and lashed his tail. "Orchidpaw has a point that we need to protect our cats. But we do need to prepare for the inevitable."

For the first time, Hollyfire spoke. "We should attack them first." She meowed and looked at each cat in the eyes, her gaze resting the longest on Emberstar. "We can use the element of surprise and fight them until they have no other choice but to retreat."

"And if we're the ones who are beaten?" Branchstripe sniffed. "If we're so scared of being attacked, we should move the elders, queens, and kits away from here just in case they attack us. Scorchpaw can go with them along with a pawful of warriors."

"And we can go for their camp." Emberstar meowed thoughtfully. His tail flicked back and forth as he considered each cats' words. "I think that's a better idea." He meowed, nodding to Branchstripe.

Sunnyshine's eyes flashed. "Cats will die!" She argued, her tail curling around Splashnose and her paw pulling Orchidpaw close. "We can't afford losing warriors!"

"If we don't, then more of our cats will die!" Adderseed flashed back. He rose to his paws and lashed his tail, fur bristling. "Do we want our rivals to see us as weak or too mouse-hearted to defend ourselves? No! We have to fight. It's how warriors live."

Emberstar stood up and scanned the faces of the cats in front of him. "Alright," he meowed. "We'll vote on what to do." Padding between Adderseed and Rockheart, he faced them. "If you want to fight, stand over here." He gestured to his right. "If you don't want to fight, stand over here." He gestured to his left. "Go."

Branchstripe, Gingerheart, Adderseed, Hollyfire, Pebblewhisker, Rockheart, and Leaffire stood to his right. Mosspelt, Orchidpaw, Splashnose, Sunnyshine, and Fennelfur stood on the opposite side.

"Ha!" Hollyfire meowed triumphantly, her tail kinked proudly over back. "We have to show the other Clans that we aren't afraid to defend ourselves!" She stood beside Gingerheart, who refused to meet Emberstar's gaze.

"Very well," the leader whisked his tail in a circle. "Get the Clan ready. We attack at once." He nodded to Gingerheart, who dipped his head and filed out of the den with the rest of the cats at his heels. Splashnose stayed behind, staring at him desperately.

"Emberstar please think this through," she begged, padding up to stand in front of him. Her eyes glittered with worry and fear. "No

cat has to die if we just hide for a few days in our territory."

Emberstar flicked his tail. "Adderseed is right that we need to look strong by attacking them first." He pointed out, his nicked ear flicking.

Splashnose blinked at him. "But it's pointless." She persisted, her voice growing whiny. "Emberstar, don't risk the lives of your warriors when we may not win the battle!"

Fury surged up Emberstar's limbs and he snapped. "Why do you care anyway?" He glared at Splashnose, anger burning in his eyes. Splashnose's fur bristled. "You're a medicine cat, and you stand outside Clan rivalries. Why do you care about the lives of warriors who you can simply heal?"

"Because," she snarled, sounding furious. Emberstar laid his ears back, claws unsheathing to scrape against the ground. "I *care* about lives other than mine! You're stupid grudge against Goldenstar will get cats killed." She took a few steps forward until they were nose-to-nose. "Use your brain, Emberstar. Do you want to cause unneeded deaths?" Without giving him a chance to answer, Splashnose shoulder passed and left the den.

Emberstar growled in annoyance and lashed his tail, irritated. He'd show her. He'd fight the hardest against OakClan. Suddenly, a face flashed through his mind and his heart skipped a beat. If he led the attack, Lilyrose might get hurt. He remembered their last interaction with a pang of guilt. Determination hardened in his belly. *I'm going to prove to Goldenstar that his threats won't go unheeded.*

***

Emberstar led the warriors with him through the dense OakClan forest, heading for their camp. Adrenaline flooded his body, leaving no room for regret or anxiety. The clean sense of danger hung thickly in the air, like the moments before a terrible storm. His heart pounded in his chest as he ran through the woods, Gingerheart and Pebblewhisker on either side. He'd made sure the queens, kits, elders, and Scorchpaw were on the far side of their

territory to keep them away from danger. Sablestorm and Mistflight were left behind as well, and Emberstar was keenly aware of the eyes that burned into his pelt.

"We'll split up into groups," he'd told them before they left. "Gingerheart, you'll lead Bouldertalon, Snakefoot, Snowhawk, and Pebblewhisker and take the dirtplace tunnel in. Flowerwing, take Nightwind, Rootspeckle, Coppersight, and Moonleaf and come in from the rear entrance. Every other cat will come with me and attack from the main entrance."

As they neared the camp, two warriors- Owlheart and Acornheart- surged forward and locked into battle with Shinesong and Swiftsoul, who were guarding the camp's entrance. Emberstar braced himself to fight and as they burst through the gorse, cats hissed and snarled.

Eggsplash and Berrystream went to the left while Hollyfire and Mosspelt went to the right. They grappled with OakClan warriors almost at once, and Emberstar came face-to-face with a cream, gray, and brown calico tom with green eyes.

The smaller cat- an apprentice, Emberstar noticed- sprang at him, hissing in outrage. "How dare you attack our camp!" The tom spat as he scratched Emberstar's muzzle. The leader jerked back with a short hiss. "Leave us alone!"

Emberstar easily dodged a blow to his shoulder and sank his teeth into the apprentice's forepaw. He twisted his head around as the apprentice shrieked in agony and pulled as hard as he could. *Pop!* The small cat let out a wail as he fell forward, bashing his nose on the ground as he mewled like a tiny kit.

"M-my leg!" He whimpered, looking at Emberstar in shock and terror. "Wh-what did you do to my leg?" He looked scared, and Emberstar took a threatening step toward him. The cat looked smaller than when he first attacked, and Emberstar bared his teeth, growling.

Paws slammed into his side and teeth sank into the side of his neck. Emberstar yowled in surprise and pain, his weight thrown to the

right and he came crashing down on the ground. Panic shot through him as he was smothered by brown tabby fur. Teeth snapped at his throat as claws tore at his fur, but the cat did not let him go. Gripping the cat's fur between his claws, Emberstar hauled them off and scrambled to his paws.

"Get away from him!" The brown tabby tom snarled, standing protectively in front of the apprentice who'd originally attacked Emberstar. "Too scared to fight someone your own size that you have to pick on an apprentice? That's pathetic."

"B-Bearheart." The apprentice whimpered as he struggled to his paws. Pain glazed his green eyes and he held his injured leg up. The warrior looked over his shoulder. "I-I can't move my leg."

Fury burned in Bearheart's amber eyes and he turned back to Emberstar, glaring at him. "You wound an apprentice so much he can't walk." He snarled and unsheathed his claws. "You snake-heart!" Bearheart leapt for him, slashing his chest before clawing his face.

Emberstar reared, lashing the tom's ears until blood ran freely. Bearheart screeched and rammed his shoulder into his belly, knocking the air off Emberstar and throwing him onto his back. The leader gasped in pain as Bearheart's claws slashed across his neck. He let out a choked cry and tried to defend himself, but his paws felt heavy and his head spun. Blackness consumed him before he could close his eyes and his body went limp underneath Bearheart. The last thing he saw were the tom's furious amber gaze.

Emberstar jerked out of the darkness that had engulfed him to find no more pain in his neck. He jumped to his paws, ready to fend off Bearheart. Then he stopped. Bearheart was nowhere to be found. There was no battle, he noticed as he looked around. Confused, he turned around to see Lichenstar. The old DawnClan leader looked strong and fit, so much different than the sick leader he'd died as.

"Greetings, Ember-" Lichenstar meowed, but Emberstar cut him off.

"Why am I here?" He demanded, his pelt bristling along his spine. "I need to get back there and fight!" He looked at Lichenstar, who

looked startled and surprised.

"You've lost a life, Emberstar." The familiar and heart-wrenching voice of Shellfur made the tom look over as the gray spotted tom approached. "Give your body a moment to heal. Then, you can go back."

Emberstar lashed his tail impatiently. "Hurry up, then." He growled, looking at the two toms. "I need to go back out there!"

"Patience, Emberstar." Warned Lichenstar with a knowing look. "If you go back too early, you'll be too weak to even stand."

The tortoiseshell tom waved his paw dismissively. "Whatever," he scoffed. All of a sudden, he felt like he was yanked backwards and he gasped. He opened his eyes to find himself lying on his back, blood sticking to his fur as it dried. Heaving himself to his paws, he looked around at the battle-torn cats. His stomach flipped over as he saw the bodies of Meadowheart, Shinesong, and Larchdust from OakClan. His heart sank to his paws as he padded along the battlefield and saw the bodies of Ravenflame and Eggsplash.

"Cats of OakClan and DawnClan!" Emberstar looked up and tensed as he saw Goldenstar standing in front of a large oak tree. There was the limp form of a cat at his paws and Emberstar winced as he recognized Eggsplash. "Your leader has lost a life, cats from both our Clans have died, need this battle continue?" He rested his green eyes on Emberstar like an emerald fire.

Emberstar's fur bristled angrily but kept his mouth shut. *I swear to StarClan, if he-*

"Oh, no!" The grief-stricken cry Owlheart split the air at the sight of his dead littermate. Emberstar looked over at the warrior to see his ear torn and bleeding, a scarlet river of blood flowing down his shoulder and his muzzle was dripping with blood. "Eggsplash!" He crumbled to the ground.

"Murderer!" Emberstar shouted at Goldenstar, his eyes narrowed in hostility.

"You caused his death, Emberstar." Goldenstar replied coldly, his green eyes blazing. "If you wish to keep your other warriors alive, I suggest you leave now. Otherwise," his claws unsheathed. "I'll rip your throat out myself."

Emberstar looked at Owlheart, who was gaping at the limp form of his brother. The other warriors who had been tangled up with OakClan cats looked beaten and bloody. Throwing his head back, he yowled. "DawnClan! Retreat!"

***

"Nice move," Splashnose growled as Emberstar entered the camp with his warriors behind him. He'd sent Acornheart and Owlheart to get the queens, elders, kits, and Scorchpaw to meet them at the camp. On his back, Moonleaf moaned in pain. "You're getting your warriors killed."

"Shut up," Emberstar spat at her. "Treat my cats before you bash me, Splashnose." Reaching over his shoulder, he gently grasped Moonleaf's scruff in his jaws and pulled her off his back. "She's one of the worst injured. When you're done with them, then you can treat my injuries." Before he stalked away, he added. "I lost a life."

"You'd be better off suffering from infection!" Splashnose snarled as he stormed toward his den.

The tom stopped and spun around, teeth bared. "*What* did you say?" He hissed, his pelt bristling. Around them, the Clan watched in shocked silence. Despite his anger, his fur grew hot with embarrassment.

Splashnose didn't falter under his furious glare. "I said, you'd be better off suffering from infection!" She repeated, sounding more angry than Emberstar. "You got Eggsplash and Ravenflame killed! Mistflight is expecting Ravenflame's kits, if you didn't know. Wait, you didn't!" Her voice rose to a screech. "You're no better than Goldenstar!"

"Do not say that!" Emberstar shouted back, his tail lashing as his claws dug into the ground. "I am your leader, Splashnose. As such, I

will be treated with the utmost respect! Am I clear?"

The medicine cat's fur bristled along her spine but she dipped her head, her eyes stormy with rage. "Yes, Emberstar." She growled through gritted teeth. With a displeased grunt, she turned and guided Moonleaf toward her den with the other warriors following.

Emberstar seethed with anger as he stalked toward his den. His pads felt like fire as he leaped from boulder to boulder before shouldering his way angrily into his large, empty den. His wounds burned but he barely felt it. *How dare Splashnose disrespect me like that?* He growled to himself, nostrils flaring. *I'm the Clan leader! She can't talk to me like that.*

"Emberstar." He swung his head around, teeth bared in a snarl, expecting to see Splashnose. Instead, the face of Patchsnow stood at the mouth of the cave entrance. The StarClan warrior approached him, but he let out a hiss.

"Stay back," he ordered. He began to pace the inside of the cave, his tail slashing the air. "Goldenstar shamed me in front of both our Clans. I should've clawed that mange-pelts' smug look off his face when I had the chance!" Emberstar shook his head, fury rolling off his pelt, hot and thick.

"You'd have been slaughtered and lost the rest of your eight lives." Patchsnow pointed out, padding forward. Instead of pawprints in her wake, little stars gleamed in the darkness. She approached Emberstar. "Goldenstar is stronger than you think, Emberstar. Don't throw yourself and your warriors into reckless battles without a proper plan."

Emberstar scoffed, glaring at the gray stone wall. "We had a plan. It's not my fault it failed."

Patchsnow's eyes narrowed. "Maybe not, but your so-called plan wasn't a plan at all." Her voice was like sharp thorns and they pierced his heart. She went on, her voice stern. "You're a young leader and you suddenly have a rival. Emberstar, think through things thoroughly before you take action." She paused, and her voice grew sad. "Or more cats will join StarClan."

Emberstar turned to face the StarClan she-cat, but she had vanished. He scowled and rubbed his head with a paw. A dull ache behind his ears made him groan slightly. Instead of going to the medicine cat's den to get his wounds treated, he turned and padded into his nest. Curling into a tight ball, he closed his eyes and fell into a troubled sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"From this moment on, until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Hazepaw. Snowhawk, you are a strong and dedicated warrior and I know that you will pass on all you know onto Hazepaw." Emberstar mewed and the large white tom nodded, getting to his paws to touch noses with Hazepaw.

The Clan took up the usual cheers, chanting the names of the new apprentices. "Sandpaw! Hazepaw! Sandpaw! Hazepaw!"

Emberstar caught Splashnose's eye and the medicine cat quickly looked away, watching the two apprentices drinking in the cheers of their Clanmates. They hadn't spoken since the battle on OakClan two moons ago, and Emberstar wondered if they would go back on good terms. Sandpaw and Hazepaw's mother, Fallingash, hurried forward to congratulate her kits while Pebblewhisker licked them around the ears. From the nursery, Snowshine watched with her kits scampering around her. The queen had given birth to quite the large litter. Mintkit, Bluekit, Flutterkit, Azurekit, and Turtlekit were two moons old and growing faster than their mother could keep up with.

Mistlesky had given birth to a surprise litter of two: Rainsweptkit and Jackdawkit. The two kits were the same age as Snowshine's new litter, and just as playful and rambunctious. No cat really knew Mistlesky was expecting until she gave birth to her kits. She'd named Adderseed as their father, and the tom had helped name the two kits.

Also in the nursery with kits were Fennelfur and Mistflight. Fennelfur- despite her age- gave birth to three kits: Rowankit, Lappingkit, and Nectarkit. Emberstar was surprised when she'd named Rockheart their father. *I guess they were close before the battle.* He supposed.

Mistflight- though heartbroken over Ravenflame's death- had given birth to three kits just like Fennelfur. Pinekit, Mosskit, and

Lavenderkit were only about a moon-and-a-half old, but they were as curious and excited about being apprentices just like the other kits.

"I'm so proud of you!" Fallingash meowed as she looked at her two kits with excitement, pride, and love in her eyes. "You're finally apprentices!"

"The day couldn't have come quicker." Pebblewhisker commented humorously as he touched his nose to their heads. "You'll be good for your mentors, right? You'll listen to everything they tell you, right?"

"Yes, Papa." Both apprentices mewed in unison and Emberstar couldn't help but chuckle. The two apprentices looked over and up at Emberstar.

The leader rose to his paws and gracefully leaped down, standing behind the four cats. "Congratulations." He mewed, nodding to Pebblewhisker and Fallingash. "You must be proud."

"You have no idea," Pebblewhisker purred dryly, padding over to meet the leader. The two toms watched as the two apprentices met up with their mentors and headed off to the camp entrance.

"They'll make wonderful warriors." Emberstar meowed, looking at the senior warrior. Pebblewhisker nodded, but didn't reply. His eyes were fixated on his kits as their tails disappeared out of the camp. "What's the matter?" He asked, concern flashing through him.

"They've grown up so fast." Breathed Pebblewhisker as Fallingash met up with her brother, Lizardberry, and they ducked inside the warrior's den. "I don't want them to get hurt."

Emberstar nudged his friend with his nose. "Don't worry," he assured him. "Sandpaw and Hazepaw will be just fine. They have Snowhawk and Rootspeckle to look after them. Plus, they have you and Fallingash as their parents to love them and be proud of them."

Pebblewhisker simply nodded, the troubled look still in his eyes. "I know that." He flicked his ear at the medicine cat's den where

Orchidpaw was helping Sunnyshine pull a thorn out of Mintkit's pad. "You can't put off talking to her forever, you know." He mewed, changing the subject as he looked at the two she-cats help the smaller kits. "Leaders and medicine cats share a special bond; like littermates."

Emberstar shrugged, discomfort crawling up his back and making his fur stand on end. "Splashnose doesn't want to speak to me," he meowed. "If she needs something, she'll talk to me."

"And if you need something?" Pebblewhisker prompted, turning to gaze into his leader's purple eyes. "Admit it Emberstar: You feel guilty that you led us into battle. Splashnose advised against it, and you went against her wishes." Emberstar flattened his ears as he went on. "I know you're the Clan leader now, but what Splashnose said is true."

"That I should've suffered from an infection?" Emberstar grunted grouchily, his annoyance growing as his mood soured.

Pebblewhisker scoffed. "Of course not." His voice softened. "But Sunnyshine cares deeply about you and Splashnose. Moreso for Splashnose, though." He let out a small chuckle. "Every cat can see it. And it's really cute."

Emberstar twitched his ear and looked across the camp at Sunnyshine as Splashnose joined her and Orchidpaw outside their den. He had to admit that Sunnyshine and Splashnose gazed at each other with such warmth and affection in their eyes. "So what? They're close friends. They have to since they're denmates."

The former leader looked at Emberstar with a disappointed look on his face. He shook his head and rose to his paws. "I'd better see if Gingerheart wants me to go on a patrol," he mewed and stretched, arching his back. "He nearly clawed my ears off when I told him I had gone on the dawn patrol already! He told me to go on another patrol right away."

Emberstar gave him an amused *mrrow* of laughter. He was glad that most of his warriors had somewhat forgiven himself for leading them into battle. Despite the deaths of Ravenflame and Eggsplash,

DawnClan was growing stronger and stronger. A warm rush of pride flowed through him as he watched Sablestorm, Moonleaf, and Rootspeckle emerging from the camp entrance. Prey hung from their mouths.

Sablestorm carried three squirrels and a mouse, Moonleaf carried a thrush and two voles, and Rootspeckle carried two robins and a fat squirrel. Emberstar nodded approvingly at their excellent cache and padded towards the warrior's den. Before he knew it, he came nose-to-nose with Bumblefall. The young warrior looked troubled, and she didn't meet her leader's gaze. Emberstar expected her to say something but she just carried on like nothing happened.

Odd. He thought with a frown as the younger she-cat headed towards Berrystream, who was talking to Adderseed, Branchstripe, Bouldertalon, and Deafears. Ducking into the warrior's den, he scanned the mass of nests. *No cat wants to go on a walk with their leader.* Emberstar thought scornfully as he turned away from the den. A flash of yellow tabby fur caught his eye and he looked up to see Sunnyshine padding toward the nursery with some herbs between her teeth.

"Sunnyshine!" Emberstar called, quickening his pace to catch up with the tabby she-cat. The medicine cat blinked at him before slipping into the nursery, the leader at her side.

"Ah, hello, Sunnyshine." Mewed the welcoming voice of Snowshine as she propped herself up. Her mix-matched eyes rested on Emberstar and surprise flickered in their depths. "Emberstar, what a surprise. What can we do for you?"

There was a mad scrabbling of paws and a crescendo of squeals alerted Emberstar and he turned his head to see Mintkit leading her littermates, Rainsweptkit, Jackdawkit, Rowankit, Lappingkit, and Nectarkit toward them. The minty-blue tabby she-kit let out a ferocious squeak and leaped at Emberstar.

"Attack!" She cried, and the other kits batted at his paws and clung to his pelt with their sharp claws. Emberstar stumbled, letting out a grunt of surprise.

"Mintkit!" Snowshine mewed, her voice scolding as the kits toppled the leader over and he fell onto his side with a heavy *thud*. "Get off him!"

Sunnyshine looked at Emberstar as he was swarmed by the kits. "I think he'll be fine, Snowshine." She mused and dropped the herbs she'd been carrying at the queen's snowy paws. "I've brought some borage to help you feed the kits." She meowed.

Snowshine gave her a confused look and pawed the borage leaves back to the medicine cat. "My milk's been dried up for an entire moon, Sunnyshine." She meowed, confused. "The kits prefer prey instead of milk now."

The medicine cat blinked at the queen before she nodded, embarrassed. "Of course." She mewed apologetically. "I'm sorry, Snowshine." Picking up the herbs, she headed for Mistflight, who was dozing with her kits curled tightly at her belly.

Emberstar closed his right eye as Mintkit placed her small forepaws on his cheek. He met the kit's bright teal eyes, filled with excitement as she held the leader down.

"Do you give up, GlacierClan warrior?" The she-kit mewed, puffing out her fur. She looked like a pinecone, and Emberstar purred with amusement.

"I give up," he meowed, flattening his ears in fake fear. "You're much too powerful for me to fight back." Blinking up at the little kit, he toppled her off his face with a gentle paw. Reaching over, Emberstar pushed the other kits off his belly and got to his paws. Shaking out his fur, he looked at the kits as they sat at his paws, their eyes wide with admiration. *They look up to me,* he thought with a warm burst of pride. "Are you hungry?" He asked, and the kits perked up. Glancing at Snowshine, he added. "Would you mind if I take them off your paws for a little while?"

The she-cat shook her head, looking tired as she looked fondly at the kits. "Not at all." She let out a sharp mew and the kits looked over at her. "I expect all of you to behave while you're with Emberstar. If something happens, I'll have him wait until you're in

the elder's den to become apprentices."

Mintkit nodded excitedly. "Yes, Snowshine!" She meowed happily and turned to Emberstar, her eys glistening. "Can we go now?"

Flutterkit tottered over to his sister and gave her a hard shove. "Shut up, mouse-brain!" He squeaked. "Do you want to be rude so we can't be apprentices?"

Emberstar purred. "Come on. Let's go see what the fresh-kill pile has to offer to fill our bellies." Whisking Mintkit to her paws with his tail, he ushered them in front of him and followed the kits as they bundled out of the nursery.

"I'm going to get a fish!" Declared Nectarkit as she strode shoulder-to-shoulder with Jackdawkit.

Rainsweptkit rolled her eyes at Nectarkit and snorted. "There are no fish on the fresh-kill pile, feather-brain!" She gave the other kit a hard shove and added in a sneer. "Unless you want to go swimming to get one!"

Jackdawkit scoffed at both kits and looked up at Emberstar. "Have you ever tried fish?" He asked.

"I can't say that I have," replied the leader with an amused flick of his tail as Nectarkit and Rainsweptkit bickered about fish and swimming. As they reached the fresh-kill pile, Lappingkit leaped at the nearest mouse, planting her paws on the prey.

"Mine!" Lappingkit declared as she glared at Rowankit and Nectarkit. "No one can have this mouse but me!"

Emberstar chuckled and touched his nose to Lappingkit's head. Turning his head, he sank his teeth into a fat rabbit and pulled it towards the kits. The rabbit was twice the size of the kits, and they stared at the large prey with awe.

"Wow!" Breathed Bluekit as she approached the fresh-kill and sniffed it. "Who caught it?" She asked, looking up at Emberstar with wide, curious eyes.

He leaned over and sniffed the rabbit near the neck where bite marks signalled where the killing bite was. He breathed deeply and picked out the scent of Lizardberry. Purring, Emberstar looked at Bluekit. "You're father did," he mewed proudly and licked the top of Bluekit's head. "I'll have to carry it since you guys are too small." Scooping the rabbit in his jaws, he whisked his tail. "Let's go to my den." He meowed around the prey.

Azurekit gasped. "Are we allowed to be in there?" She asked worriedly with a hesitant look over her shoulder at the nursery. "We could get in big trouble."

Emberstar swept his tail over her back comfortingly. "Don't worry about it," he soothed. "You'll be with me. Snowshine will see nothing wrong with that." Looking at the other kits, he added. "Grab whatever prey you want and follow me." He instructed.

As the kits picked voles, mice, squirrels, and tried to get a crow but failed, they tottered up to Emberstar and looked up at him with wide eyes. Emberstar purred and led the way to the rocky slope and bushed out his tail. The kits latched onto his tail with their claws and he bit back a wince. He carried them up to the top and let them slither onto the sun-baked ground.

"Wow!" Turtlekit exclaimed as he charged into the dark den with his littermates on his heels. "It's gigantic in here!" His voice echoed off the stone walls and Emberstar purred.

"Is bigger the further you go!" Emberstar advised as he nudged the other kits forward. Striding into the den, he shivered as the cool stone bit at his paws and he fluffed out his fur.

"I'm going to sleep in here!" Mintkit mewed as she flopped in Emberstar's nest, a vole at her paws. "My den!"

Flutterkit charged forward and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right!" He scoffed and looked at Rowankit. "Emberstar is the leader, not you!"

Mintkit lashed her tail. "I'll be leader before all of you!" She retorted and sank her teeth into her vole, her eyes burning with ambition.

Emberstar purred and sat down in the warmer sand by the nest. "I'd like to be leader for a while longer before you take over, Mintkit." He laughed and put the rabbit down at his paws. "Who wants the first bite?"

As they ate, Emberstar's mind wandered and he looked around at the kits. He loved being with them- despite the large age difference- and teaching them the ways of the warrior and just spending as much time with them as possible. *One day, I might have kits. Hopefully they won't be quiet. I'd take them on as many adventures as they want.* He thought contently as he took a few bites of the rabbit.

"Emberstar?" Rowankit asked, looking up at him from where she shared a vole with Lappingkit.

"Hm?" The leader looked over at the sandy-colored kit. "What's up, Rowankit?"

"Can you teach us about the warrior code?" She mewed, her eyes curious and eager to learn.

Jackdawkit looked up from the mouse he shared with Rainsweptkit and Flutterkit. "Yeah!" He chimed in. "And teach us how to hunt and fight?"

Emberstar felt a burst of love as the kits looked at him eagerly. "Alright." He meowed and cleared his throat. "I'll tell you a few of the rules in the code, because your future mentors should be teaching you this." The kits didn't object, they simply listened intently. "One of the most important rules in the code is: "A kit must be three moons old to become an apprentice."

Mintkit looked at Bluekit. "We'll be apprentices in a moon!" She meowed excitedly.

The leader nodded. "Indeed you will," he meowed with a blink at the kit. "This is important to our life style because we don't want our youngest and most vulnerable members to die in a battle older cats should fight." He paused and took a bite of the rabbit, giving himself more time to think of which rule to go over next. When he swallowed, he continued. "Have the apprentices or your parents

told you about the Gatherings?" He asked. At once, each kit was bursting with questions.

"Who are the leaders?" Asked Bluekit.

"What about the medicine cats?" Squeaked Rainsweptkit, her tail sticking straight up.

"Are NightClan cats really part fish?"

Emberstar flicked his tail for silence and the kits quieted down. "I take it that none of the others have told you about Gatherings?" He meowed and the kits shook their heads. "The other leaders are Sparrowstar of GlacierClan, Sneezestar of NightClan, and Goldenstar of OakClan." He kept his mew steady as he spoke about the golden tabby tom. "The medicine cats are Lilyrose and Blackberrythorn of OakClan, Poppypool and Newtpaw of GlacierClan, and Driftwind and Poolpaw of NightClan."

"Who are the deputies?" Azurekit asked as she and the other kits finished eating and curled up together at Emberstar's belly.

"Splinterstorm is OakClan's deputy, Stormfern is GlacierClan's, and Maplewhisker is NightClan's." He answered as he laid down and continued to eat the rabbit.

"Can you tell us a story?" Yawned Turtlekit as he curled tightly with Mintkit and Azurekit.

His heart warmed until he thought it would melt. "Of course. I would love to." As he started telling the kits stories of his apprenticeship and being a warrior until they had fallen asleep soundly beside him. Emberstar yawned and rested his chin on his paws, closing his eyes and falling into a gentle sleep.

***

Emberstar shivered as he and Sunnyshine trekked through the forest. He'd volunteered to go on an herb-hunt with her and they'd set off moments ago. "What are we looking for again?" He asked, looking over at the medicine cat, who was tasting the air.

"Goldenrod, horsetail, and yarrow." Replied the she-cat as she scanned the forest. "We'll find goldenrod easily, same with horsetail. But yarrow is a bit harder since the pine forest is by NightClan's territory."

"Alright," Emberstar meowed and stretched. "What do goldenrod and horsetail look like?"

Sunnyshine twitched her ear. "Goldenrod looks like a dandelion but it's taller and the yellow flowers are brighter. Horsetail is tall like dandelion but with fleshy stems. It's bristly and it tickles a little bit."

"What about yarrow?"

"Yarrow is flowery with jagged green leaves and a tangy scent." Sunnyshine answered. "It has a bitter taste. Be careful if we find some that you try not to drop it if you gag." They were silent for a moment when she sighed. "You need to talk to Splashnose, Emberstar." She meowed suddenly. He looked sharply at her and she went on. "You both are avoiding talking for what reason?"

"None of your business, Sunnyshine." Emberstar growled, his mood dampening abruptly.

She turned on him, eyes flashing with a fierce protection he'd never seen before in her. "Yes, it is." She retorted hotly. "As much as you'd like to think, I'm not dumb, Emberstar. I'm just as much of a medicine cat as Splashnose and Orchidpaw than you are." Her tail lashed as she tried to calm down. "Splashnose is my mentor. You are my leader. I am your medicine cat. As such, you should listen to what I say. Whether or not you like it." Sunnyshine closed her eyes and her shoulder fur- which had started to bristle- flattened with forced effort. "Come on. I saw some goldenrod by the Training Hollow."

Emberstar watched in a stunned silence as the usual playful and carefree Sunnyshine stalked toward an oak tree and started picking the flowers at its trunk. *Being a full medicine cat has changed her.* He thought, guilt pricking his paws. *Being leader has changed me, right?* He shook his head. *Just being the mentor of Orchidpaw must be getting to her. That must be it.* As he followed, a yowl stopped him in his

tracks.

"Emberstar!" He turned to see the GlacierClan warrior named Cedarpelt racing toward them. The dark gray tom had a torn ear and was bleeding from bites and scratches.

"Cedarpelt?" Sunnyshine meowed, concerned as she rushed forward, already preparing to heal the GlacierClan tom. "What's the matter? Why are you here?" Her tone was worried rather than challenging.

The tom gasped as she started to treat his ear with some goldenrod and he looked at Emberstar. "G-Goldenstar's invaded our camp!" He meowed, his eyes clouded with terror. "Sparrowstar and the Clan are outnumbered. Please, help us!"

Emberstar's eyes darkened and he turned to Sunnyshine. "Take Cedarpelt back to the camp and tell Gingerheart to bring warriors to the GlacierClan camp." He ordered and the medicine cat nodded without arguing. Spinning around, he bolted through the trees.

***

By the time he made it to the GlacierClan camp, his legs were screeching and his throat burned like fire. He forced himself through the gorse bushes and stared in absolute horror at the scene. OakClan's scent wreathed around him but the woodland warriors were gone. The camp was in ruin and Emberstar darted toward where Stormfern was being helped up by Rosefur and Foxpelt.

Stormfern looked up at the DawnClan leader, eyes glimmering with pain and gratitude. "You came." She rasped, her voice laced with pain and grief. "I was afriad you wouldn't."

Emberstar touched his nose to her head, worry flooding through him. "What happened?" He asked, looking at Foxpelt and Rosefur. Both warriors were bleeding from horrible wounds that looked awful. "Is every cat okay?"

Rosefur's beautiful ginger fur was stained red with dried blood. Her yellow eyes were hollow with defeat and grief. "Goldenstar attacked us so suddenly, no cat anticipated it." She meowed, her voice raw.

"Are any cats dead?" Emberstar whispered.

"I saw Perchwhisker by the elder's den." Rosefur's eyes turned to a burning yellow fire. "Goldenstar's warriors are ruthless. They're killing without reason." She scraped the ground with her claws. "We didn't do anything to them! What did we do to deserve this?"

"That's a good question, Rosefur." Sparrowstar meowed as she limped up to the four cats. Emberstar turned to the leader and saw blood on her neck but there was no wound. *She lost a life.* "Thank you for coming, Emberstar." She added, dipping her head to the DawnClan leader.

"I apologize for not making it in time, Sparrowstar." He meowed, his tail flicking. "Cedarpelt is at our camp now, being treated for his injuries as we speak." Glancing around, he added. "Can we talk?"

Sparrowstar nodded and touched noses with Stormfern. "I'm sorry for your loss," she murmured and the deputy lowered her head and sorrow. Straightening, she nodded to Emberstar. "We'll speak in my den. Come on."

Emberstar followed, wincing as he saw the battered GlacierClan warriors helping each other into what looked like Poppypool's den. As they slipped into the hollow of a large oak tree, Emberstar mewed. "Are you and your Clan alright?" He asked.

The brown tabby leader sighed, her shoulders slumping. She suddenly looked older than she was. The formidable, strong leader seemed resigned and defeated. "I don't think we can heal from this as quickly as I hope." She murmured, looking at the ground.

"Of course you will," Emberstar protested, striding to her side and pressing against her supportingly. Sparrowstar stiffened at the action, but relaxed. "You and your Clan are stronger than you think, Sparrowstar. You're a fantastic leader, and you can lead your Clan to greatness."

Sparrowstar looked at him, her eyes dull and dim. Emberstar felt a pang of sympathy for the she-cat and he pressed his muzzle against her shoulder. Her eyes flashed with grattitude before she looked at

her paws. "I wish Snowstar were still leader." She growled through clenched teeth. "She would know what to do."

Emberstar padded in front of her and nudged her gently. When she looked up, her eyes were a cloudy mess of emotions. "Don't worry, Sparrowstar." He meowed, trying to keep his tone light and uplifting. "I know you will get through this. You're stronger than this, and your Clan needs you."

"What Clan needs a leader who can barely keep her lives in tact?" Sparrowstar hissed softly. Her paw pressed against her throat, and her eyes darkened. "I've lost another life and my Clan have lost Perchwhisker and possibly more. Maybe I'm not the right cat to be leader."

"That's nonsense!" Emberstar hissed. "You're the leader GlacierClan needs! It doesn't matter if you've lost lives, what matters is serving your Clan." He flattened his fur and went on. "I know I haven't been DawnClan's leader for very long, but I trust myself to know what to do when something bad happens." He held her gaze steadily. "Do you trust yourself?"

A sudden determination hardened Sparrowstar's yellow gaze and her eyes unclouded. "I do." She meowed, her voice much stronger and more confident than it had heartbeats before.

"Good," Emberstar nodded. "Can you tell me what the fight with OakClan was like? Who was there?" He asked.

Sparrowstar nodded and sat down. "It was a horrible fight."

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Jagged Stone for a Clan meeting!" Emberstar yowled. The trek back to the camp was like a nightmare, but he endured and he had a lot to tell his Clanmates.

From the elder's den, Tornface led Stoneblaze, Halfsnow, Poppybee, and Leaffire into the clearing. The elders looked concerned, but

they held their heads high.

As the Clan gathered, Emberstar began speaking. "I have returned from GlacierClan's camp. We were too late to help them and Perchwhisker was killed in the fight. However, Sparrowstar relayed some very important information that I must tell you." He made sure every cat was listening. "Sparrowstar told me that alongside OakClan's warriors in the fight were Dark Forest cats."

"That's impossible!" Splashnose called over the anxious mews that arose from the crowd. "Dark Forest cats are bound to the Place of No Stars until they're forgotten or killed! They can't show up in the waking world!"

"That's not true," Berrystream shouted over his Clanmates. He rose to his paws and he and Bumblefall padded toward the Jagged Stone. "We have something to tell you all."

Emberstar narrowed his eyes at the two littermates and nodded stiffly. "Very well. What is it?" His heart clenched with anticipation and he lashed his tail.

"We have been training in the Dark Forest with Nightstar." Bumblefall meowed, her voice loud and clear. Before any cat had a chance to say anything, she went on. "Not only us, though." She turned her head to look accusingly at Adderseed and Lizardberry. "Adderseed, Lizardberry, Branchstripe, Bouldertalon, Snakefoot, and Deafears have been training in the Place of No Stars!"

Emberstar stared at Deafears, shock rippling through him. Nightstar had told him that his kin was training with her, but he didn't want to believe her. Yowls of outrage and shock filled the air and Emberstar let the clamor continue before letting out a loud caterwaul that silenced the Clan. "All of you who have trained with Nightstar, come forward." His voice was icy cold, and his tail lashed.

Lizardberry stood up and Adderseed followed him to Berrystream and Bumblefall's side. Snowshine gasped in horror and shielded her kits' eyes with her tail as she bundled them behind her.

Branchstripe looked ashamed as he, Bouldertalon, Snakefoot, and Deafears also stepped forward.

"All of you took an oath to be loyal to your Clan and to defend it at the cost of your lives." Emberstar's voice was cold, and Gingerheart shot him a worried and warning look. The leader ignored him. "And yet you've betrayed your Clan, your kin, and me. Have you anything to say in your defense?"

Branchstripe lifted his head. "I'm deeply sorry for what I have done, Emberstar." He meowed, looking guiltily over at Coppersight and his kits. "Please forgive me. I will take whatever punishment you give me. Just don't separate me from my family." His words sounded genuine, and there was distress in his eyes.

Emberstar lifted his chin. "Alright." He meowed. "Do any cats object to having Branchstripe remain in the Clan?" No cat spoke up. "Very well. Branchstripe, from this moment on, you will be an apprentice and do apprentice duties until I think you've learned your lesson. You will not have a mentor, but you will not be hunting and fighting for your Clan. You may keep your warrior name, but if you mess up, you will be exiled. Am I clear?"

Branchstripe nodded and bowed his head. He said nothing, but Coppersight choked on something and looked away from her mate.

Turning to the other Dark Forest trainees, he added in a harsh tone. "Do any of you feel any remorse for your wrongdoing?" He growled. When no cat said anything, he hissed. "I, Emberstar, leader of DawnClan hereby sentence Berrystream, Bumblefall, Lizardberry, Adderseed, Bouldertalon, and Deafears into exile. If any of you are seen on DawnClan's territory, my warriors have my permission to kill you."

Hollyfire gasped in shock and horror but Emberstar silenced her with a flick of his tail. "Get out. Before we make you leave." He snarled and leaped down from the Jagged Stone. "You have no place in DawnClan anymore, *traitors*."

The group of cats looked about ready to argue when Bumblefall dipped her head and led them out of the camp. When they were

gone, Emberstar turned to the rest of the Clan.

"If any of you are training with the Dark Forest and are refraining to say so, leave now. I will not tolerate traitors in my Clan." He growled. *Except the traitor that leads them,* a small voice inside him sneered but he pushed it away. "Meeting dismissed."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Emberstar shook raindrops from his fur as the light rain became a gentle drizzle. Beside him on either side, Rockheart and Coppersight carried some prey. Between his jaws was a thrush and two voles: A successful catch. *The kits will enjoy the taste of thrush,* he thought, pride filling him. Three whole moons had gone by since the exile of the Dark Forest trainees and since then, the Clan had been on-edge and distrustful of Branchstripe.

Now, the Clan had more apprentices than Emberstar knew what to do with. He paired the apprentices with the warriors he thought would work well together, but with so many apprentices at once, he didn't know who to pair them with.

"Emberstar!" Hazepaw's call made his ears perk up and he saw the young tom and his sister trotting toward him, their tails waving in greeting.

"Hazepaw, Sandpaw," Emberstar dipped his head to the two apprentices as Rockheart and Coppersight moved off. Rockheart to Fennelfur, and Coppersight to Scorchblaze, who had recieved his warrior name shortly after the failed attack on OakClan.

"No need to be so formal, Emberstar." Purred Sandpaw, brushing her cheek affectionately against Emberstar's. "We've missed you."

"Yeah," added Hazepaw as he bumped heads with the leader. "You've been gone since we got back from training and we had to help Splashnose, Sunnyshine, and Orchidpaw with dumb chores around the camp." He looked over his shoulder where Sunnyshine was telling Splashnose to hang some wet herbs to dry on some ivy.

"Poor things," Emberstar mewed and playfully swatted at their shoulders. Straightening up, he puffed out his chest and addressed them formally. "Have you done your apprentice duties for the day?"

Sandpaw's eyes flashed before she dramatically bowed before him.

"Yes, O' Wise Leader. We have done all of our duties, slaving away while you provide our rations for the day."

Emberstar snorted and launched himself at the two siblings, chasing them away and halting in the shade of the Jagged Stone. He purred as the two apprentices called their farewells as they laughed, disappearing into the apprentice's den. *I'd love to have kits to chase around the camp,* he thought with a pang of loneliness. *If only I'd saved Patchsnow.* Saddened by the thought, he hauled himself up the rocks that lead up to his den and slipped inside.

"Wanting to see me, Emberstar?" Meowed the familiar and heart-wrenching voice of Patchsnow as the spirit glimmered in front of his nest. The painfully familiar fluffiness of her fur, the glint in her eyes as she looked at him, the frown on her beautiful face that etched her crushing disappointment and impatience.

"Er, hi, Patchsnow." Emberstar rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly with a paw, his ears suddenly starting to burn. *Oh StarClan, what do I say?*

As though reading his thoughts, Patchsnow rolled her brilliant yellow eyes. "Don't be a mouse-brain, Emberstar." She padded toward him and Emberstar felt his mouth grow dry and he shifted his paws. "What are you doing, meddling around like a mouse without a tail? The Dark Forest is rising, and your mother and her no-good-mentor are at the top, leading the charge. You must stop them!"

Emberstar lashed his tail. "How can I fight a cat who is my mother and *way* more powerful than me?" He retorted then sighed. "Gingerheart thinks I screwed up big time with attacking OakClan and Splashnose said I'd be better off getting an infection and dying from it. I thought I did the right thing, but apparently everything I do is wrong."

Patchsnow's eyes twinkled with glimmering stars. Emberstar felt his heart twist at the thought of what could have been had she lived. "And your heart lies elsewhere," she observed coolly. "You regret what you did to Lilyrose." His heart skipped a beat at the mention of the pretty OakClan medicine cat.

"Of course I do," he lifted his gaze from the stone floor to meet Patchsnow's eyes. "She's a medicine cat and I'm a leader. It's against the warrior code to harm a medicine cat."

The StarClan warrior's head tilted to one side, her fur shimmering. "That's not all." She pressed, and Emberstar stiffened beneath his pelt. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

Emberstar snapped his head up. "Of course not!" He scoffed, his fur growing warm at the she-cat's words. His tail lashed as he imagined meeting Lilyrose at the border. *We haven't met since I lashed out at her,* he realized with a jolt. He suddenly longed to see her, feel the warmth of her body against his as they watched the stars twinkle above their heads.

"You're wrong," Patchsnow rasped, tugging him out of his thoughts. The she-cat had a sad glint in her yellow eyes, and a hint of disappointment in her mew. "You love her, Emberstar. I know you do. I know what will happen in the future between you two, and I grieve for you."

Emberstar was silent for a few heartbeats before changing the subject. "How can I stop my mother?" He asked. The unease returned to Patchsnow's eyes. "Sparrowstar said that when Goldenstar attacked her Clan, Dark Forest cats were there too."

Patchsnow rose to her paws with a flick of her tail. "I cannot see what the Dark Forest cats are doing in the Place of No Stars, but I can meet with a friend there and get information." She padded toward him and touched noses with him, but Emberstar didn't feel a thing. "I'll come back as soon as I can, old friend. If you need me, I'm always here."

Pawsteps approaching the den alerted Emberstar and he turned around to see Gingerheart at the mouth of the cave. His deputy looked deeply troubled, and Emberstar hurried to see what the tom wanted.

"Emberstar," meowed the bright ginger tom. "Sparrowstar and Sneezestar have sent messengers." He looked worried, and the underlying excitement in his voice intrigued Emberstar and he

leaned closer. "They want to meet up at the Gathering Island. Just the leaders, deputies, and medicine cats, per their requests."

Emberstar nodded. "Send Owlheart and Acornheart to me, I'll talk to them. We should send a few more hunting patrols and get ready." Gingerheart nodded, turning to leave when Emberstar added. "Wait-Gingerheart." The deputy stopped and looked warily at him. "Is there something you aren't telling me?"

Gingerheart's blue eyes flashed and he narrowed them slightly before they dilated. "Mosspelt is expecting my kits," he meowed proudly, his tail high in the air.

Emberstar purred and flicked his shoulder with his tail. "Congratulations," he praised. "Thank you for making my sister happy." He murmured softly and Gingerheart nodded before padding out of the den.

***

Emberstar felt highly uncomfortable as they emerged from the treeline, entering the hollow that the Gatherings took place. Gingerheart was to his left, the medicine cats to his right. He took a deep breath, prepared to face conflict, and broke into a run. He let out a call and two pairs of eyes gleamed in the darkness. Sparrowstar and Sneezestar were there with their medicine cats and deputies.

"Welcome, Emberstar," a chillingly familiar voice raked through the air and Emberstar stopped dead. Blinking, he saw a third and forth pair of eyes with Sparrowstar and Sneezestar. He recognized Goldenstar's green eyes at once, and then he saw the other cat's eyes. Amber. Nightstar was here.

"We thought you wouldn't come," Goldenstar strode toward the DawnClan cats, and Gingerheart stiffened. "No need to be so hostile, Gingerheart." He looked at the deputy's tensed muscles with a sneer. "We just want to talk."

The familiar stench of blood filled his nose as Splinterstorm, Goldenstar, Stormclaw, and Elmpaw herded them toward the other

three cats. Through the dim moonlight of the claw-moon, Emberstar saw wounds laced around Sneezestar and Sparrowstar's bodies. Stormfern and Maplewhisker were a little ways away, their eyes glowing with defiance and fear.

Next to them were Poppypool and Newtpaw of GlacierClan, and Driftwind and Poolpaw of NightClan. Driftwind's eyes were glittering, while Poolpaw looked scared out of his mind. Emberstar narrowed his eyes as he remembered that Driftwind trained with Nightstar.

"I see that fake message worked," mused his mother as she sauntered lazily over. Her muscles rippled beneath her black fur, which was faded and Emberstar could see through her. "Well done, Sparrowstar. You have my respect." She turned her amber gaze on the wounded leader, and Sparrowstar bared her teeth.

"You mangy furball," she spat at the black leader, who looked calm and threatening. "You attack my Clan and ambush us here? You're more fox-hearted than I thought."

Nightstar twitched her tattered ears. "Your little meeting got in the way of me seeing my son," she mewed simply, as though it were an explanation. She turned to Emberstar, and he curled his claws into the cool grass. "And now that he's here, I have little interest in the rest of you."

Goldenstar stalked up to his former mentor and stood sturdily beside her. "We're going to take over your Clans," he sneered, and Nightstar turned her amber gaze on him. Something dark gleamed in their bright depths and Emberstar felt a sudden uneasiness grow in his belly. "We already have spies working from the inside. You have shut us out for so long. But now, now it's time for you to pay!"

Nightstar narrowed her eyes and, in the moonlight, Emberstar saw her claws unsheathe. Realization hit him like a blow and before he could warn the OakClan leader, she leaped for him and churned her paws into his fur.

Goldenstar yelped in surprise as he fell to the ground with Nightstar on top of him and she bit down hard on his throat. Emberstar

watched in a stunned and horrified silence as the golden tabby tom let out a strangled yowl before his struggling ceased and he grew still.

"Goldenstar!" Splinterstorm rushed to his leader's side as Nightstar backed away, blood dripping from her chin as she looked coldly at her former apprentice. "You bee-brain! How could you? You trained him!" The deputy of OakClan glared at Nightstar.

Nightstar shrugged. "He should know better than to speak for me. I may have trained him, but that means nothing to me." She raised a paw and wiped the blood from her mouth. Goldenstar twitched and groaned, and Emberstar heard Gingerheart breathe in sharply beside him. "I will let most of you go without a scratch. However, be warned that this is not the end of the Dark Forest." Her eyes glowed menacingly. "Now leave."

Emberstar forced himself to meet her gaze and narrowed his eyes. "The Clans will stop you," he croaked, his voice more feeble than a kit's. Nightstar met his eyes steadily, almost gloating. *I did this,* they taunted. *And you have to suffer.* "We will always stop you."

"And why wouldn't they?" Nightstar twitched one ear and looked over at Sparrowstar, Sneezestar, and the medicine cats. "You cats hold onto empty promises and thoughts of StarClan. You would have more freedom if you listened to me when I was alive." She shook her head and her body tensed once more. "Get out of here. The Clans' time to rule is over."

Emberstar hurried to Sparrowstar and Sneezestar. "Are both of you okay?" He asked in a low, worried murmur.

Sparrowstar bristled as Nightstar, Goldenstar, Splinterstorm, Stormclaw, and Elmpaw watched them closely. "I'll never be okay after this," she spat. "Nightstar is threatening the Clans. How can StarClan approve of this?" Emberstar glanced at the starry sky of Silverpelt. *Surely they can't appraove of what Nightstar is doing,* he thought with a glance at his mother.

Sneezestar snorted. "Isn't it obvious?" He growled. "StarClan has abandoned us since Nightstar was born. It's only just being realized

because we were too mouse-brained to notice it ourselves." He raised his head and drew his ears back. "NightClan is responsible for half of Nightstar, OakClan is responsible for the other half. GlacierClan and DawnClan were caught in the crossfire. For that, I am sorry. But my Clan will fight against Nightstar. Whether you're with us or not."

Emberstar tried to flatten the fur that rose on his neck. "Surely there's some other way we can do this." He argued. "StarClan will send us a sign and-"

"Burn the stars!" Snapped Sneezestar, and Emberstar gasped, eyes widening with shock. "What good have they done for us in the last seasons? They let Nightstar be a tyranic maniac and didn't stop her. Now she's back, and they're doing nothing!" He turned his green eyes to Silverpelt and glared. "My Clan will be doing something to stop this, with or without StarClan." As he started to limp away, Emberstar took a step, ready to follow when Sparrowstar blocked him with a paw.

"StarClan has not abandoned us!" He called, his voice desperate. "Sneezestar!" The light yellow tabby leader did not turn back as his deputy and medicine cats hurried to follow.

Sparrowstar touched his shoulder lightly with the tip of her tail. She slowly shook her head, her eyes glittering with unease and burning with sympathy. "There's no use in trying to convince him," she blinked. "We will put a stop to this, Emberstar. That I can promise you."

***

Emberstar sat anxiously outside the medicine cat den, waiting for Splashnose and Sunnyshine to exit was nearly killing him. The thoughts of the previous night's ambush at the Gathering Island ate at him. He'd advised the other cats not to say anything to the Clan, but his fear grew more and more as he saw the younger members being blissfully ignorant. They'd gotten back at dawn, and Gingerheart said nothing the entire way.

He caught Mosspelt's eye from across the clearing where she and Hollyfire were talking to Rainsweptpaw and Jackdawpaw. She game him a little nod before returning to the conversation. *She knows.* His fur prickled with unease.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Hissed the voice of Patchsnow as the starry she-cat fizzled at his side. He hadn't noticed her company, and it startled him.

"I've never been more sure about anything," he murmured back, making sure no cat was listening. The last thing he wanted was his Clan thinking he'd gone mad. "We have to beat back Nightstar into the Dark Forest where she belongs."

Patchsnow's yellow eyes glittered with stars. "She's your mother, Emberstar. Despite all the bad she's done, she still is your kin." She shook her head. "How will you do this?" Before Emberstar could reply, Splashnose, Sunnyshine, and Orchidpaw padded out of the den and walked straight through the StarClan spirit.

"Who're you talking to?" Splashnose asked, her eyes searching his. Emberstar blinked as Patchsnow faded away and shook his head.

"No one but myself," he laughed uneasily and shook out his fur, getting to his paws. "I'll call the Clan together and tell them about Nightstar." He looked at Orchidpaw, who didn't meet his gaze. Emberstar tasted the discomfort rolling off her pelt in chilling waves. He felt a pang of symapthy. *She's so young, and she has to deal with this.*

Splashnose lowered her voice to a murmur. "Are you sure?" She asked gently. She sounded like Patchsnow, and Emberstar twitched his ear. "This could go badly and freak out the Clan."

Emberstar nodded confidently. "I'm sure, Splashnose." He answered strongly and touched his nose to hers. He closed his eyes and let out a small sigh. "Thank you." He whispered and pulled away. Her amber eyes glowed warmly as Sunnyshine pressed lovingly against her side. "Let's do this."

***

Emberstar led the patrol toward NightClan's territory. His patrol consisted of himself, Gingerheart, Mosspelt, Hollyfire, Stemfang, Moonleaf, Rootspeckle, Sablestorm, Pebblewhisker, Rockheart, Fennelfur, and Snowshine. After the mess of a Clan meeting, Emberstar had wanted to go to Sneezestar and elaborate on a plan to get rid of Goldenstar and Nightstar.

Moonleaf strode to his side, her green eyes anxious. "Will they welcome us?" She whispered. "Mintpaw was scared when I told her about leaving for NightClan. What if they attack us or turn us away?"

He paused and licked the top of her head. "It'll be okay," he promised. Before they left, he put Coppersight in charge. He knew he could trust the she-cat with his life, but wasn't sure how the apprentices would take the change. "Sneezestar wants to get rid of Nightstar as much as we do. When we talk to him, we'll make a plan to-"

"Emberstar!" A pained cry from ahead made the fur on his spine stand on end. A cat was running through the forest toward them. They bolted across the border and nearly crashed into Hollyfire. It was Maplewhisker, Sneezestar's deputy.

"Maplewhisker!" Gasped Stemfang. The fur on his back rose slightly, and Emberstar guessed he hadn't forgiven her for attacking him and Ravenflame when they were 'paws.

Maplewhisker bled heavily from a gashed shoulder and torn ear. She trembled and Mosspelt ran to support her. "C-come quick!" She panted, her eyes wide with shock. "It-it's Nightstar. She attacked our camp!"

"Are any dead?" Demanded Gingerheart, taking a step toward the she-cat with fear glittering in his angry eyes.

Maplewhisker breathed hard. "Too many." She whispered. "Sneezestar was the first to die when Nightstar and Goldenstar kept killing him. I'm not sure who else, but we need help!" She turned to Emberstar, her eyes pleading. "Please, Emberstar!"

Emberstar touched his nose to her trembling head. "Snowshine with escort you to the camp. Our medicine cats will treat your wounds." He raised his voice and turned to the others. "Come on!" He led the rest of the patrol over the border and through the trees. His paws skimmed the forest floor, his cats hard on his tail.

When they reached the NightClan camp, it was in ruins. Cats were fighting and blood was hanging in the air like a cloud of grief. Emberstar leaped nimbly over the bramble wall and slammed into a ginger-and-white she-cat with a scarred pelt and amber eyes. He recognized her as Amberscar.

"Look who showed up." The Dark Forest cat's faded pelt flickered as he churned his paws into her stomach and she clawed at his back. Pain flared up his body but he forced himself to bite down on her shoulder and battered her side with his claws. "The kitty comes to the rescue." She dealt a hefty blow to the side of his head, and he reared on his hind legs, swiping at her face. She ducked and lunged for his chest, sinking her teeth in while he staggered back with a grunt.

He knocked her down with a hard cuff over the ears and she hit the ground without making a sound. Hatred burned in her amber eyes and Emberstar slashed at her face, spraying blood into the air. Biting back a yowl of pain as she clamped her jaws around his leg, he dropped onto all fours and leaped onto her. They flipped and somersaulted madly across the camp, twisting to sink their teeth into flesh and fur as they clawed and slashed blindly. Emberstar bit down hard on her right shoulder and flung her against a nearby boulder. Her head smacked the gray stone with sickening *crack!* and she hit the ground. She did not get up.

Pain washed over him as the adrenaline slowly ebbed away. Blood trickled into his left eye, partially blinding him as he blinked furiously. He turned to his right just as a tortoiseshell she-cat with teal eyes slashed Stemfang across the throat. The snarl that pierced the air startled Emberstar as he found himself launching himself across the camp, hurtling himself at the she-cat.

A red haze clouded his vision and before he knew it, he ripped mercilessly at the she-cat's throat and she was suddenly lying at his

paws, fading away to nothing. A pool of blood lapped at his paws where she disappeared. He shook his head and the haze vanished, leaving him stunned and queasy. Stemfang lay not far off, his throat bleeding and eyes staring sightlessly up at the pale-blue sky. Bile rose in his throat as he bounded to his dead apprentice's body and placed a paw on his shoulder. Nightstar caused Stemfang's death. He lifted his head and peered around the mass of fighting cats, searching for his mother.

He spotted Goldenstar fighting Pebblewhisker, Hollyfire, Mosspelt, and Snowmask. The leader was badly outnumbered, but he fought like a lion until he was brought to the ground with the force of all four cats.

"Emberstar!" Fennelfur limped up toward him, her eyes glazed with pain. Her eyes drifted over Stemfang's body and grief washed over her. "How...?"

Emberstar pressed his forehead against hers, feeling grief crash down on her. "He died bravely," he whispered. Pulling away, he looked at the senior warrior. "Are any others dead?"

"A few." Fennelfur sighed. "Beachstep, Moonwish, and Fawnpelt from NightClan." Dread clogged Emberstar's throat like a piece of fresh-kill that wouldn't go down. "A-and Pebblewhisker and Rockheart." She hung her head. "We can't stay and fight forever."

"I know." Emberstar sighed. "Have you seen my mother?" He asked.

Fennelfur nodded. "I saw her fighting Sablestorm and Brokenflower." She flicked her tail and Emberstar looked past her to see his mother wrestling with his former apprentice while Brokenflower lay wounded on her side.

With reckless abandon, he shot toward his mother, calling to his sisters on the way. "Mosspelt! Hollyfire!" They quickly joined him and fell into step on either side of him. They pelted toward their mother and sprang in unison.

Nightstar was unaware of their attack and as she shoved Sablestorm away, she was thrown to the ground by her kits. She screeched with

surprise and twisted around, snapping her jaws around Hollyfire's foreleg and flinging her clear. She slashed Mosspelt's cheek and while she drew back, Emberstar gripped his mother by the shoulders and threw her to the ground. His mother yelped and nipped at his paw as it came crashing down on her head, slamming it against the ground.

With her dazed, Mosspelt let out a battle cry and flung herself at Nightstar. Hollyfire clawed at Nightstar's face while Mosspelt handled keeping her on the ground by biting her legs whenever she tried to get up.

Emberstar watched, panting, as his mother was torn apart by his sisters. She died a second time as she did the first time: Killed by her kits, and surrounded in a pool of blood. When she finally faded away, Emberstar threw his head back into a emotionless yowl. *We won.*

Epilogue

Grasskit leaped at Mothkit, who toppled over with a yelp. "Got you!" The she-kit boasted as she sprang away from her littermate. Halfkit watched his sisters with affection glowing in his different colored eyes.

"Mama!" Mothkit complained, looking at Mosspelt with annoyance in her purple eyes. "Grasskit's doing it again!"

"Now, now, kits," chided their mother as she flicked her tail. Her voice was as gentle as a dove's feathers, as it always was when she spoke to her kits. "Your uncle should be on his way any moment now. Do you want to look nice or not?"

Halfkit looked at Mosspelt, his eyes wide. "Emberstar's coming?" She nodded and he straightened. His sisters giggled and he shot them a glare. "We're going to meet the Clan leader," he growled, anxiety clawing at his belly. "We have to look our best!"

Mosspelt twitched her ear at his words. "He's not just the Clan leader, dear." She reminded him softly, and Halfkit kneaded the ground with his small paws. They were a moon old, and he itched to be an apprentice, to tour the territory and learn how to hunt and fight. "He's your kin and my brother."

"I know, I know." Halfkit twitched his tail. She'd told them over and over again not to just know their uncle as the Clan's leader, but he couldn't help it. *If Emberstar's the leader, maybe I can be too!* He hadn't met his mother's brother yet, but he badly wanted to make a good impression.

"Is that him?" Asked Mothkit as she peered through a tendril of bramble in the nursery. Halfkit hurried to her side with Grasskit on his heels. Outside the bramble den, he saw a tortoiseshell tom with the brightest purple eyes he'd ever seen. He had powerful shoulders, huge paws, and a deep scar along one shoulder and another smaller one on his leg. Mosspelt nodded and Halfkit was filled with awe.

He's so huge!

"Hello, Mosspelt," rumbled the tortoiseshell leader as he slipped inside the nursery. He touched noses with the queen and looked over at the three kits, who gawked at him with wide eyes. "Hello, little kits." He purred.

"Emberstar, meet Grasskit, Halfkit, and Mothkit." Mosspelt meowed warmly as she sat up and looked proudly at her kits. Halfkit fluffed up his fur, trying to look as big as his leader, but failed. *How did he get so tall?* He wondered, studying the tom's height. *And those shoulders...how long did he have to train?*

Emberstar sat down by his sister and examined each kit with friendly eyes. "You look much stronger and bigger than the last time I saw you." He observed.

Mothkit tilted her head to one side. "What do you mean?" She squeaked. "We've never met you before."

Mosspelt twitched her whiskers with amusement. "He came to see you as soon as you were born." She explained. "So did your father, in fact." She turned to her brother. "Have you seen Gingerheart anywhere?"

The leader nodded. "He went on a patrol to check the OakClan border. Though Swiftstar is the leader, we don't want anything happening without our knowing." His eyes softened as he looked back at the kits.

Grasskit sat down next to Halfkit, her eyes narrowed in concentration. "Don't you have kits?" She asked Emberstar, who blinked in surprise. "I mean, you're the Clan leader. Surely you have kits who are apprentices or warriors?"

"Grasskit!" Mosspelt scolded, but Emberstar nudged her.

"Don't worry about it, Mossy." He looked at Grasskit, his eyes thoughtful. "To answer your question: I do not. I never took a mate after Patchsnow died, and I think running the Clan and looking after you scamps are good enough for me."

Immediately, Grasskit asked another question. "Who's Patchsnow?"

Pain clouded the Clan leader's eyes and he recoiled slightly. "Patchsnow is- was- my mate." He answered softly. "She died many moons before you three were born."

Mosspelt pressed against his side and murmured something too quietly for Halfkit to hear. Finally, she turned to the kits. "I think that's enough introduction for one day." She meowed, and none of them argued. Halfkit could tell Grasskit's probing questions pained Emberstar, and he wanted to make him feel better, but didn't know how. "It's time for your nap."

"I'm not tired!" Complained Grasskit, trotting toward them with her tail sticking indignantly in the air. Mothkit followed, Halfkit falling in line behind. As they curled up at their mother's belly, Emberstar left quickly and Halfkit followed him with his eyes before closing them.

***

Halfkit's eyes fluttered open when Grasskit's paw kicked his face. He was on his back and he rolled over, shaking moss from his thin pelt. Mosspelt was sleeping, as were his sisters and he squeezed free. It was dark outside, and Halfkit quietly approached the den entrance. He'd gone in the camp before, but it was only when he saw a bright yellow leaf fall from the sky. He'd caught it, but was ushered inside by Mosspelt. He saw a flash of purple as Emberstar turned away from a bright ginger tabby tom and headed for a rocky slope that led to a den carved from stone.

Halfkit ran out of the den, following the leader. When he reached the base of the pile, he stared up with awe as Emberstar's tail vanished above. *He climbed that quicker than I ever could!* He thought, amazed. Placing a small ginger paw on a stone, he hauled himself up, using the rocks to push himself higher and higher until he reached the top. He plopped down, panting as he caught his breath. Sound made his ears prick and he looked over at the gaping blackness that made up the leader's den. He could make out words, but he hadn't seen any other cat enter the den other than Emberstar.

"I met Mosspelt's kits," meowed the voice of the leader as Halfkit approached stealthily. "Yes, they were very cute and very fluffy. Grasskit asked me about you and kits." There was a pause then Emebrstar went on. "No, I didn't tell them about the fox."

"E-Emberstar?" Halfkit squeaked into the darkness. There was a small gasp from inside the den and the tom stumbled out, his head twisting to find the cat who spoke. When he looked down, Halfkit crouched in front of him, his pelt fluffed up in fear. "I-I followed you here." He blurted. "I-I'm sorry I listened, I shouldn't have come!"

"Don't worry, Halfkit." Emberstar cupped his paw and pulled Halfkit toward his leg. The kit buried his face into the leader's thick fur, unsure of what to do or expect.

"W-who were you talking to?" He mumbled. "I didn't see any other cat in the den."

Emberstar tensed before relaxing. "I was talking to my mate," he murmured and sat down, his thick tail curling around Halfkit. "Patchsnow lingers around the camp, even though she passed onto StarClan. Whenever I'm alone, I talk to her."

"Does she talk back?"

Emberstar chuckled. "All the time. Sometimes, I can't tell if she's talking to me or holding herself back from clawing my ears." A purr rumbled in his chest, deep and hearty. "Why are you up here, Halfkit?"

"I-I saw how upset Grasskit's questions were making you," he stammered. "I wanted to make you feel better, b-but I didn't know how." He looked at his mix-matched paws.

His uncle was silent for a long time before he spoke. His voice was soft and gentle, and it reminded him of Mosspelt. "I'm not upset, Halfkit." He murmured. "I do miss Patchsnow, but I know she's always around when I need her most. That's why StarClan exists: To let you know that you're never truly alone."